



LIBRARY
OF THE
UNIVERSITY
OF ILLINOIS

823

C878ma

v.2

Return this book on or before the
Latest Date stamped below.

University of Illinois Library


AUG 28 1965

NOV 10 1961

JUN 25 1968

L161—H41

Granddole & S. M. May 1896
Sue W. 31



1

1

MARRIED OR SINGLE?

NEW NOVELS AT ALL LIBRARIES.

HEART OF OAK : A Three-Stranded Yarn. By W. CLARK
RUSSELL. 3 vols.

THE PROFESSOR'S EXPERIMENT. By Mrs. HUNGERFORD.
3 vols.

THE WOMAN IN THE DARK. By F. W. ROBINSON. 2 vols.

THE VOICE OF THE CHARMER. By L. T. MEADE. 3 vols.

SONS OF BELIAL. By WILLIAM WESTALL. 2 vols.

LILITH. By GEORGE MACDONALD. 1 vol.

LADY KILPATRICK. By ROBERT BUCHANAN. 1 vol.

CLARENCE. By BRET HARTE. 1 vol.

THE IMPRESSIONS OF AUREOLE. A Diary of To-Day.
1 vol.

DAGONET ABROAD. By GEORGE R. SIMS. 1 vol.

THE KING IN YELLOW. By ROBERT W. CHAMBERS. 1 vol.

IN THE QUARTER. By ROBERT W. CHAMBERS. 1 vol.

LONDON : CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY.

MARRIED OR SINGLE?

BY

B. M. CROKER

AUTHOR OF

"DIANA BARRINGTON," "A FAMILY LIKENESS," ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

LONDON

CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY

1895

823

C878ma

V. 2

CONTENTS OF VOL. II.

CHAPTER	PAGE
XIV. A SOCIAL GODMOTHER ...	1
XV. MR. JESSOP DOES HIS DUTY ...	10
XVI. TWO VISITS AND A LETTER ...	40
XVII. GONE TO IRELAND ...	67
XVIII. WANTED—A REASON ...	82
XIX. A DISAGREEABLE INTERVIEW ...	102
XX. NOT “A HAPPY COUPLE” ...	115
XXI. AN INTERRUPTION ...	132
XXII. MR. WYNNE’S VISITOR ...	148
XXIII. A BOLD STEP ...	172
XXIV. AN UNEXPECTED HONOUR ...	185
XXV. PLAIN SPEAKING ...	196
XXVI. MR. WYNNE MAKES A STATEMENT	219
XXVII. A PROMISE POSTPONED ...	227
XXVIII. A PORTIÈRE WHICH INTERVENED	241



MARRIED OR SINGLE?

CHAPTER XIV.

A SOCIAL GODMOTHER.

THE next day Lord Tony's only sister, Lady Rachel Jenkins, arrived to call—but not for the first time—upon Miss West. She was an extremely vivacious and agreeable little woman, with dark eyes and flashing teeth. She took Madeline out with her in her own brougham, and—oh, great favour!—introduced her to her pet dressmaker. This august person viewed Miss West's stone-coloured costume with an air of amused contempt; it was not good style; the cut of the skirt

was quite "out," and she finally wound up by uttering the awful words, "Ready made." It was not what Madeline liked, or even thought she would like, but what Lady Rachel suggested and Madame Coralie approved, that was selected.

"Your father, my dear," patting the girl's hand confidentially, "met me on the stairs, and we had a few words together. I'm going to show you what we do in London, and what we wear, and whom we know; and what we don't wear, and whom we don't know, my little country mouse!"

So the country mouse was endowed with half a dozen fine dresses chosen entirely by Lady Rachel—dresses for morning, afternoon, and evening.

"I only order six, my dear," said her chaperon cheerily, "as the season is getting over, and these will carry you

on till August, if you have a good maid. Madame Coralie, we can only give you five days," rising as she spoke.

But Madame Coralie threw up eyes and hands and gesticulated, and volubly declared that it was *absolument impossible*! She had so many gowns for Ascot and the royal garden party. Nevertheless, Lady Rachel was imperious, and carried her point.

"The opera mantle is to be lined with pink brocade, and you will line the cloth skirt with shot sulphur-coloured silk; and that body I chose is to be almost drowned in chiffon and silver."

She was to be female bear-leader to this young heiress, and was resolved that her appearance should not disgrace her, and that "the old squatter," as she called him, should be taken at his word, and made to pay and look pleasant.

The succeeding visit was to a milliner's; the next to a shoe shop, when the same scene was rehearsed. Madeline looked on and said nothing, but made an angry mental note that she would never again go out shopping with this imperious little lady. Why, even the poorest had the privilege of choosing their own clothes! Why should this little black-browed woman, barely up to her shoulder, tyrannize over her thus? Simply because, my dear, unsophisticated Madeline, she has promised to bring you out—to be your social godmother, to introduce you to society, such as your father loveth, and to be friendly. Besides all this, she has already decided in her own mind that “you will do very well,” and are not nearly as rustic as she expected; and she has made up her mind—precisely as she did about your satin dinner-dress—that

you are to marry her brother. Oh, happy prospect !

Lady Rachel was Lord Anthony's only sister—a woman of five and thirty, who, thirteen years previously, had married a rich *parvenu*—plain, homely, much older than herself—for his money. She had no fortune as Lady Rachel Foster, and she was not particularly pretty ; so she made the best available use of her title, and changed it for twenty thousand a year and the name of Jenkins. Mr. Jenkins liked being announced as “ Lady Rachel, and Mr. Jenkins ; ” to be asked in a loud voice, in public places, “ How is your wife—Lady Rachel ? ” For her part, she liked her fine house, servants, carriages, and jewels ; and both were, to a certain extent, satisfied with their bargain. Perhaps of late years there had been a certain amount of disappointment.

6 Married or Single?

Lady Rachel went more and more into society, and drifted widely apart from Mr. Jenkins and his city friends. Mr. Jenkins was not considered an acquisition in her circles, which were a little rapid. He was given to understand—by deeds, not words—that he was rather a bore, and that he must not always be expecting to be tied to the tail of his brilliant, fashionable, frivolous little wife—and then, Mr. Jenkins was jealous!

It was quite time that Anthony was married, thought his sister. He was not prepossessing in appearance. He was well known in society, and especially in her own set, as a fellow with an empty head, empty pockets, and a roving nature. He was not popular. She was aware that he had been rejected by heiress after heiress. He would not be modest and content with a plain girl, or an elderly widow, or

even a faded spinster on the shady side of forty! No; Lord Anthony Foster must have beauty and money to boot, and there was no bidding for his coronet in the quarters these came from. Prudent mammas had set a mark against his name, and where his attentions would have been welcomed, he turned up his nose, and talked in a high moral manner about the sin of marrying one's grandmother. His affectionate sister had vainly suggested one or two ladies that she had thought suitable, but until now Lord Tony had been too *difficile*, and her pains had gone for nothing!

But now, oh, joy at last, he had found a girl almost, as one might say, to order—young, accomplished, ladylike, very pretty, and very rich.

Lady Rachel already considered Madeline her sister-in-law, and had already

8 Married or Single?

selected her own gown for the wedding, so far ahead do some active, imaginative natures throw their mental life. There was nothing to wait for. Tony was willing—the old squatter was willing—and the girl—well, she was willing, of course.

Madame Coralie's dresses came home punctually, and were all that the most fastidious could desire, in fit, style, colour, and cut. Madeline spent the whole afternoon, in the retirement of her own room, slowly trying on all six, one after the other, with ever-increasing approbation. The climax was an oyster-white satin, with a turquoise velvet and silver bodice—a dream of a dress, to quote the enraptured Josephine.

Madeline had an æsthetic appreciation of herself as she stood before a glass and contemplated the slim figure, white

rounded arms, the rich glistening skirt, the exquisitely moulded bodice. Could this apparition be the same young woman who had humbled herself before Mrs. Kane, and carried up her own coals? What a difference dress made—in self-respect and self-importance! Dress, as she now realized it, was a powerful engine in cultivating one's own self-esteem. Yes, a silk-lined skirt could impart a surprising amount of confidence! She glanced over one shoulder, then over the other, then looked full at her reflection, and said to herself, with a smile, "I do love pretty clothes!"

CHAPTER XV.

MR. JESSOP DOES HIS DUTY.

LADY RACHEL and Madame Coralie, between them, soon metamorphosed the appearance of Miss West. She took to her elegant dresses and mantles and tea-gowns with astonishing facility; also to her landau and pair, victoria and cobs, diamonds, dignities, and the last fashion in dogs—a Chinese spaniel. It was not a specimen of animal she especially admired; but her father paid a long price for Chow-chow, because he was the rage, and he looked well on the back

Mr. Jessop does his Duty. 11

seat of the victoria. Yes, Madeline was remarkably adaptable ; she developed a predilection for all the sensual accessories of colour and perfume. She also developed a fastidious taste at table, and a rare talent for laying out money.

And what of Laurence Wynne during the time that his wife is revelling in luxury ?

He has been making rapid strides on the road to recovery ; he is almost well ; and the end of his sojourn with the friendly farmer's family is now drawing perceptibly near. He has letters from Madeline, as she finds means to post them with her own hands—letters full of descriptions of her new life, her new friends, and all the wonderful new world that has been opened to her view.

She, who was never at a dance, excepting at the two breaking-up parties at

Mrs. Harper's, has been living in a round of gaiety, which has whirled faster and faster as the season waned—thanks to Lady Rachel's introductions and chaperonage; thanks to her beauty, and her father's great wealth.

Miss West has already become known—already her brilliant colouring and perfect profile have been noted by great and competent connoisseurs. Her face was already familiar in the park.

Luckily for her, dark beauties were coming into fashion; in every way she was fortunate. Her carriage was pointed out in the Row; her table was littered with big square monogrammed envelopes and cards of invitation, far too numerous for acceptance. And Miss West, the Australian heiress as she was called, had opened many doors by that potent pass-key, a pretty face, and admitted not only

Mr. Jessop does his Duty. 13

herself, but also her proud and happy parent.

Madeline does not say all this in so many long sentences to Laurence ; not that he would be jealous, dear fellow ! She knows him better than that ; but she is sensible that there is a certain incongruity between their circumstances just at present, and she will not enlarge on her successes more than is absolutely needful. Yet a word drops out here and slips in there, which tells Laurence far more than she supposes. Besides this, Laurence is no fool. He can draw inferences ; he can put two and two together—it is his profession. Moreover, he sees the daily, society, and illustrated papers, thanks to Mr. Jessop, who has given a liberal order to his news-agent, believing that his gifted friend, who always lived at high brain-pressure,

14 Married or Single?

must be developing into a state of coma in his rural quarters, among cows and pigs and geese.

Laurence reads the letters between the lines. He reads society's doings, and in the warm June and July evenings, as he strolls about the fields alone, has plenty of leisure for reflection. These are not very happy times for Laurence Wynne. He has found some consolation in work. One or two articles from his pen have made their way into leading reviews, and been praised for their style, substance, and wit. A short sketch of a country tragedy has added another feather to his cap. In these long, lonely, empty days, he had given ample time and brain-work (his best) to these vivid articles, readily scanned in a quarter of an hour. They recalled his name; at any rate, people began to remember

Mr. Jessop does his Duty. 15

Laurence Wynne—a clever chap who made a foolish marriage, and subsequently lived in a slum, and then nearly went and died. Apparently, he was not dead yet! There was a good deal of vitality in him still, and that of a very marketable description. Success, however small, breeds success, and a little sun began to shine on Laurence Wynne at last. He was asked to contribute articles to the *Razor* and the *Present*, two of the most up-to-date periodicals. He was well paid—cash down. He was independent once more, and he felt as if he would like to go out into the fields and shout for joy.

Now and then he ventured to write to his wife—to Miss West, 365, Belgrave Square; and Miss West eagerly snatches the letter from under a pile of society notes, in thick fashionable envelopes,

plunges it into her pocket, and reads it greedily alone; for although she is a little bit carried away by admiration, money, and power, yet a letter from Laurence puts all these pleasures completely into the shade, as yet.

This is his last that she holds in her hand, written after long meditation, and with many a pause between the sentences. He had turned out an article for the *Razor* in half the time.

“Holt Hill Farm.

“MY DEAREST MADELINE,

“Your welcome letter is at present lying before me; and now that the household is asleep, and that there is not a stir on the premises, nor a sound, except the loud ticking of the kitchen clock, I sit down to write to you without fear of being disturbed, for this, my dear

Mr. Jessop does his Duty. 17

Maddie, is going to be an important epistle. I am sincerely glad to hear that you are so happy; that your father shows that he has affection for you; that you and he are no longer strangers, but getting on together capitally. I hope his tenderness will be able to survive the news you have to tell him, and must tell him soon—the fact, in short, that you are married. I can quite understand how you are dreading the evil moment, and can fully enter into your feelings of shrinking reluctance to dispel this beautiful new life, this kind of enchanted existence, by just one magic word, and that word to be uttered by your own lips. But if you are adverse to mentioning this one word—which must be spoken, sooner or later—let me take the commission on myself. I will speak to your father. I will bear the full blast

18 Married or Single?

and fury of his indignation and disappointment. After all, we have nothing to be ashamed of. If I had known that you were the heiress of a millionaire, I would never have ventured to marry you—of that you may be sure. But, under other circumstances, it was different. In the days when you had neither father nor home, I offered you my home, such as it was. There was no disparity between our two walks in life, nothing to indicate the barrier which has subsequently arisen between us.

“Maddie, we have come to the cross-roads. You will have to choose one way or the other. You will have to choose between your father and me—between riches and poverty. If your father will not listen to the idea of your having changed your name, you must let me testify to the fact; and if he shuts his

Mr. Jessop does his Duty. 19

doors on you afterwards, you are no worse off than a year ago. If I thought you would ever again have such a terrible struggle to live as you experienced last winter, I would not be so barbarous, so cruel, as to ask you to leave your present luxurious home. But things look brighter. I am, thank God, restored to health. I have a prospect of earning a livelihood; our dark days are, I trust, a thing of the past. I am resolved to set to work next week. I cannot endure the idea of living in idleness on your father's money; for although the whole of our stay here has cost less than you say he has recently given for a dog, still it is his money all the same—money for your education, money diverted from its original use, money expended on a fraud. Of late I have not touched it, having another resource. I only wish I could replace every

halfpenny. Let us have an end of this secrecy and double-dealing. And now that we have once more got a foothold on life, and the means of existence, I believe I shall be able to scramble up the ladder! Who knows but you may be a judge's wife yet! I wish I could give you even a tithe of the luxuries with which you are now surrounded. I would pawn years of my future to do it. But if I cannot endow you with diamonds and carriages, I can give you what money cannot buy, Maddie, an undivided heart, that loves you with every pulse of its existence.

“Now I have said my say. I only await a line from you to go at once to town, and lay bare our secret to your father. It is the right thing to do; it is, indeed. You cannot continue to live this double life—and your real home is

Mr. Jessop does his Duty. 21

with your husband and child. It is now three months and more since you drove away down the lane with Farmer Holt—three long, long months to me, Maddie. You have had ample time to make an inroad on your father's affections. You can do a great deal in that way in less than three months. If he is what you say, he will not be implacable. You are his only child. You tell me that he thinks so much of good blood and birth—at least in this respect the Wynnes should please him. He will find out all about us in Burke. We were barons of the twelfth century; and there is a dormant title in the family. The candle is just out, and I must say good-bye. But I could go on writing to you for another hour. The text of my discourse, if not sufficiently plain already, is, let me tell your father of our marriage.

22 Married or Single?

One line will bring me to town at once.

“I am, your loving husband,

“LAURENCE WYNNE.

“Do not think that I am complaining that you have not been down here. I fully understand that your father, having no occupation, is much at home, perhaps *too* much at home, and can't bear you out of his sight—which is natural, and that to come and go to the Holt Farm would take four hours—hours for which you would be called on to account. And you dared not venture—dared not deceive him. Deceive him no longer in *any way*, Maddie. Send me a wire, and he shall know all before to-morrow night.”

Madeline read this letter over slowly, with rapidly changing colour. Some

Mr. Jessop does his Duty. 23

sentences she perused two or three times, and when she came to the last word, she recommenced at the beginning — then she folded it up, put it into its envelope, thrust it into her dressing-case, and turned the key.

She was a good deal disturbed; you could read that by her face, as she went and stood in the window, playing with the charms on her bangle. She had a colour in her cheeks and a frown upon her brow.

How impatient Laurence was! Why would he not give her time? What was three months to prepare papa? And was it *really* three months? It seemed more like three weeks. Yes, April; and this was the beginning of July.

Her eyes slowly travelled round the luxurious apartment, with its pale blue silk hangings, inlaid satin-wood furniture,

and Persian carpet, her toilet-table loaded with silver bottles and boxes, a large silver-framed mirror, draped in real lace, the silver-backed brushes, the cases of perfume ; and she thought with a shudder of the poor little room at No. 2, with its rickety table, shilling glass, and jug without a handle. Deliberately, she stood before the dressing-table, and deliberately studied her reflection in the costly mirror. How different she looked to poor, haggard, shabby Mrs. Wynne, the slave of a sick husband and a screaming baby, with all the cares of a miserable home upon her young shoulders ; with no money in her purse, no hope in her heart, no future, and no friends !

Here she beheld Miss West, radiant with health and beauty, her abundant hair charmingly arranged by the deft-fingered Josephine, her pretty, slim

Mr. Jessop does his Duty. 25

figure shown off by a simply made but artistic twenty-guinea gown; her little watch was set in brilliants, her fingers were glittering with the same. She had just risen from a dainty lunch, where she was served by two powdered footmen and the clerical butler. Her carriage is even now waiting at the door, through the open window she can hear the impatient stamping of her six-hundred-guinea horses.

She was about to call for an earl's daughter, who was to chaperone her to a *fête*, where, from previous experience, she knew that many and many a head would be turned to look after pretty Miss West; and she liked to be admired! She had never gauged her own capacity for pleasure until the last few months. And Laurence required her to give up all this, to rend the veil from her secret,

and stand before the world once more, shabby, faded, insignificant Mrs. Wynne, the wife of a briefless barrister!

Of course she was devoted to Laurence. "Oh," angrily to her own conscience, "do not think that I can ever change to him! But the hideous contrast between that life and this! He must give me a little more time—he must, he must! I *must* enjoy myself a little!" she reiterated passionately to her beautiful reflection. "Once papa knows, I shall be thrust out to beggary. I know I shall; and I shall never have a carriage or a French gown again."

And this was the girl who, four months previously, had pawned her clothes for her husband's necessities, and walked miles to save twopence!

Sudden riches are a terrible test—a severe trial of moral fibre, especially

Mr. Jessop does his Duty. 27

when they raise a girl of nineteen, with inherited luxurious tastes, from poverty, touching starvation, to be mistress of unbounded wealth, the daughter, only child and heiress of an open-handed Croesus, with thousands as plentiful now as coppers once had been.

“I will go down and see him. I must risk it; there is no other plan,” she murmured, as she rang her bell preparatory to putting herself in the hands of her maid. “Letters are so stupid. I will seize the first chance I can find, and steal down to the Holts, if it is but for half an hour, and tell Laurence that he *must* wait; he must be patient.”

And so he was—pathetically patient, as morning after morning he waited in the road and waylaid the postman, who seldom had occasion to come up to the farm; and still there was no letter.

Madeline was daily intending to rush down, and day followed day without her finding the opportunity or the courage to carry out her purpose. And still Laurence waited; and then he began to fear that she must be ill. A whole week and no letter! He would go to town and inquire. No sooner thought of than done. Fear and keen anxiety now took the place of any other sensation, and hurriedly making a change in his clothes, and leaving a message for Mrs. Holt, he set off to the station—three miles—on foot, and took a third-class return to London. Once there, he made his way—and a long way it was—to the fashionable quarter of Belgrave Square. It was a sultry July afternoon, the very pavement was hot, the air oppressive—people were beginning to talk of Cowes and Scotland.

Nevertheless, many gay equipages

Mr. Jessop does his Duty. 29

were dashing about, containing society notabilities and bright parasols. One of these swept round a corner just as Laurence was about to cross the street; he had only a fleeting glimpse as it passed by. A landau and pair of bay steppers, with what is called "extravagant" action, powdered servants, two ladies in light summer dresses, and a young man, with a button-hole and lavender gloves, on the back seat.

One of the ladies had a faint resemblance to Madeline, as well as could be gathered, from an impression of bright dark eyes, shaded by a French picture-hat and a chiffon sunshade. No, it could not be her. This was some patrician beauty, who looked as if she had been accustomed to such an equipage from the days of her perambulator.

It was merely a passing idea, and

quickly brushed aside by Laurence as he once more walked on rapidly. At length he approached the house—he was at the same side of the square—within four numbers now. His heart beat rather quickly as he glanced up. No; none of the upper blinds were pulled down, he observed with relief, and then he took in the dimensions of this palatial mansion, with a porch and pillars, conservatory, billiard-room, and buildings built out, and built on, wherever they could be crammed. The awnings were out—gay red and white striped ones—banks of flowers bloomed in the balconies. Oh, what a contrast to Solferino Place! Would not Madeline see it too? he asked himself, with a pang. After a moment's hesitation he rang the bell, and almost instantly the door was opened by a tall, supercilious looking footman.

Mr. Jessop does his Duty. 31

“Is — is — Miss — West at home?” stammered her husband.

“Not at home,” replied the servant, in a parrot voice, holding out his hand for the card that he presumed would be forthcoming.

“Is she quite well?” ventured the visitor.

“Quite well, sir, thank you,” having studied the questioner, and come to the conclusion that he was not one of your nobodies, like his worthy master. “Who shall I say?” he asked confidentially.

“It is of no consequence. I have forgotten my cards. I will call again,” turning as he spoke and slowly descending the steps.

This was a most rum go in Jeames’s opinion. He might, at least, have left his name! But no. Jeames stood

gazing after him, with what is called "the door in his hand," for two whole minutes, glanced sleepily around the big, white, hot-looking square, and then went in to study the paper and the latest betting on Goodwood.

Laurence made his way to Mr. Jessop's chambers, in—oh, extravagance!—a hansom, and found that gentleman extremely busy, and, as he expressed it, "up to his ears." He, however, knocked off for the time being, in order to have a smoke and a chat with his friend, whom he declared that he found looking as fit as a fiddle, and requested to know when he was going to put his shoulder to the wheel again?

"Lots for you to do, my boy. Martin has married an heiress and cut the concern. My sister has married the son of old Baggs, of the great firm of Baggs

Mr. Jessop does his Duty. 33

and Keepe, solicitors. My fortune is made, and so is yours ! ”

“ I ’ m glad to hear it. ”

“ And, by Jove, old chap ! those articles of yours, in the *Pepper and Salt Magazine*, have taken the whole baking—are regular scorchers ; lots of people are talking of them, and asking if they are by the same Laurence Wynne, of the Inner Temple—fellow with a beard ? Who would have thought of your breaking out in that line, eh ? as ready with your pen as your tongue. ”

“ Readier. ”

“ And look here, Larry, there is that case of *Cox v. Fox* coming on, and you can have a finger in the pie if you like. ”

Larry did not clutch at this lucrative opening ; he puffed away moodily at a cigarette, and stared out of the window in rather an abstracted fashion.

34 Married or Single?

His keen-eyed friend noted this, and said, in a totally different key—

“And what about Mrs. Wynne?”

His companion looked at him quickly, coloured faintly, threw his cigarette out of the window, and said nothing.

“She has not told the old gentleman yet?”

“No, not yet.”

“So I surmised, as they say in America. I saw her at the opera last night, the cynosure of all eyes, and her proud and happy father noting that half the glasses in the house were fixed on Miss West. Ahem! How long is it to go on—this little comedy? Eh?”

“I can’t tell you!” impatiently. “Not another hour as far as I am concerned. I don’t wish her to sail under false colours any longer. I came up to see her to-day.”

Mr. Jessop does his Duty. 35

“The deuce you did!” in blunt amazement.

“But she was out.”

“I suppose you saw the house and the style. By Jove! it’s like royalty. I dined there last week.”

“*You* did?” in unfeigned amazement.

“Yes, your most humble servant. I’ve met Mr. West at my club; he knows a friend of mine—an impecunious lord—that is all. The dinner was a banquet, a feast fit for Lucullus himself. I had the honour of being presented to Miss West.”

“Indeed!”

“Of course I had never seen her before,” winking at his friend. “And, upon my word, I declare I scarcely recognized her! Dress, diamonds, and manner—manner begotten of importance,

36 Married or Single?

appreciation, wealth, and luxurious surroundings. Not that Mrs. Wynne's manners were not always those of a gentlewoman, but there is a difference between doing the honours of a couple of herrings and a sheep's head, in one living room, and being the hostess presiding over a French dinner—with perfect appointments and exotic flowers—entertaining lords and ladies and bishops—eh?—and doing it well, too. But wherever she got her good blood, Laurence, it did not come from her father's side of the house. I sometimes felt inclined to run my fork into him, or to shy a wine-glass at his head. He is so blatantly proud of Robert West, his success, his money, his grand acquaintances, and, above *all*, his daughter. Excuse me, he is a thundering little bounder!”

“You think he will be furious when

Mr. Jessop does his Duty. 37

he knows that he has a son-in-law?" said Laurence, gravely.

"If you were a lord—or even a baronet—and had some sort of handle to your name——"

"But as I have nothing—not even Q.C.?"

"I think, from what I know of him, that he will be unpleasant, my dear Larry—very unpleasant."

"And the first shape that his unpleasantness will take will be to turn Madeline out of doors?"

"Yes, I should say so—I think the odds are fifty to one."

"Well, she has her own home, at any rate. I shall set to work on Monday. I'll go round and see about my old chambers. You can send me those papers, and tell Tom, the clerk, that I am coming back for good. I shall take

38 Married or Single?

lodgings as soon as I have looked round—in a more airy locality than Solferino Place. Mrs. Holt will keep the child till we are settled.”

“You—er—mean—you and Mrs. Wynne?” looking curiously at his companion.

“Well, yes; who else should I mean?”

“Does she say anything about returning?”

“No-o,” staring confusedly; “but it is understood.”

Here ensued a short silence, during which Mr. Jessop was nerving himself to speak his mind to his friend—to speak for that friend’s good—a thankless task, but he assured himself that it was his *duty*.

“Larry, old chap, you and I have been pals since we were in jackets at Harrow, and I’ve been your ally ever since the day

Mr. Jessop does his Duty. 39

you licked Thompson, major, for pitching into me. We've always stuck together somehow ever since. I think a great deal about your concerns. What hurts you hurts me."

"Out with it," cried the other, brusquely. "Out with it. I know you are going to say something disagreeable. That will do for the overture!"

"I must say one word to prepare you, old man," suddenly standing up, laying his hand on his companion's shoulder, and looking down into his face. "It is a fatal mistake to expect too much in life—to be too sanguine! Don't—don't be too sure that she *wants* to come back."

CHAPTER XVI.

TWO VISITS AND A LETTER.

Miss WEST returned from her drive. She had been to Lord's to see the Oxford and Cambridge cricket match. She had been surrounded by admirers, like flies round a pot of honey, and had the most eligible *partis* of the season endeavouring to win their way to her good graces as she promenaded up and down between the innings, and partook of tea and strawberries in the tents; and Lady Rachel (who had her own diversions) looked on and said to herself, "That Madeline was becoming much too run after, and

Tony would have to mind what he was about." Meanwhile, Mr. West, for whose society there was no competition, hugged himself with joy, as he saw a baronet and a baron approach Madeline in turn. This was precisely as it should be! Then he went up to Lord Tony and said, "I say, Tony, wasn't that the Duke of Margate I saw you talking to just now—a funny old Johnny, with a shabby hat and red face?"

"Ye-e-s—I—I believe so," shrinking instinctively from what he knew was to follow—as per usual.

"Then just, when you get a nice little opening, introduce *me*, there's a good fellow. Watch him when he comes out of the long tent; he is having tea with the FitzMorse Montagues. I'll do as much for you another time."

Lord Tony dreaded these demands.

He even went so far as to hide from Mr. West, or to absent himself altogether from gatherings where they were likely to meet. He had introduced his sister to the Wests. He liked Madeline immensely. His aunt, Lady Clapperclaw, had called, and Miss West had got cards from a few good houses, but he really drew the line at presenting "the old squatter," as Mr. West was nicknamed by all his acquaintances. People did not *like* it. They glared fiercely when this dapper, well-dressed, white-spatted, white-hatted little person was introduced to them—a man who bowed and talked, and talked and grinned, exactly like a toy monkey! Confound Tony Foster, who the deuce was this infernal little cad? What was Tony about? He was always mixed up with a second-rate set, but why thrust his

shoddy friends on *them*? However, when it came to be hinted that the "squatter" was rolling in money, and dying to spend it—literally panting to give entertainments of the costliest description—a second Monte Cristo, with a spirit of unbounded generosity and one lovely daughter—matters took a different complexion. Mr. West was elected to a couple of good clubs, some visiting-cards and invitations were left on Mr. and Miss West by footmen who had descended from coroneted landaus. Ladies with slim, smiling, scapegrace sons called on the heiress. Fast young married women, who looked forward to dances and all manner of festivities, called (and made their friends leave cards). Young men who had seen and admired Miss West got introduced, and dropped in on Sundays. Lord Moneycute,

44 Married or Single?

an elderly baron, who had long been looking for a wife with money, also Sir Crete Levanter, called—and they subsequently dined—frequently at 365. Many people whom the ignorant colonial thought smart, grand, and distinguished, called; but it was not all gold that glittered; there was a great deal of brass about some of these visitors! On the other hand, pretty mammas, with daughters who were in the best set, set their faces against these parvenus. Mammas with rich and titled sons were equally stand-off. One or two great ladies, who had been introduced, as it were, accidentally to Miss West, cut her at once.

But the Wests were as yet ignorant of the lights and shades of London society, and they were both—Mr. West especially—perfectly satisfied that, though not in

the Marlborough House set, they were close upon its borders.

* * * * *

“A gentleman had called to see her,” murmured Miss West languidly, as she drew off her gloves on the threshold of the morning-room. “Did he leave his card?”

“No, ma’am, he did not; he said he had forgotten it.”

“And he asked for me—not for Mr. West?” she continued indifferently, glancing at her parent, who was rapidly turning over a pile of notes, and picking out those emblazoned with a coronet.

“I’ll tell you who it was,” he broke in; “it was Lord Maltravers. He came about that macaw he promised you.”

“No, sir,” put in Jeames, firmly but respectfully; “it was no gentleman I ever saw before—certainly not Lord

46 Married or Single?

Maltravers—though he might have been a lord for all I know to the contrary.”

“It wasn’t a tradesman?”

“Oh no, sir!” most emphatically.

“What was he like?” inquired Madeline, opening a letter very deliberately as she spoke, her thoughts very far away from Laurence.

“Well, ma’am, he looked quite the gentleman. He was tall, about my ’ight” (complacently), “very dark eyes, a short beard—what you’d consider a ’andsome young man. He carried a queer-looking stick with a ivory top, and he seemed disappointed as you were not at home!”

“A queer-looking cane with an ivory top, and he seemed disappointed!” The letter fluttered out of Madeline’s hands, and fell to the ground, as the unconscious Jeames thus blandly announced that the visitor had been her

husband! She was glad to stoop quickly, and thus hide her face, with its sudden increase of colour. Laurence had come up to see her! What rashness! What madness!

“Well!” exclaimed her father, looking at her sharply, “have you made out your mysterious visitor, eh?—eh?—eh?”

“I think he must have been the brother of one of my school-fellows from the description,” she said, with wonderful composure, tearing open another letter as she spoke.

“Humph!” grunted Mr. West, in a tone that showed that school-fellows’ brothers were not at all in his line.

“Here is an invitation to Lord Carbuncle’s for Thursday week,” said his daughter, dexterously turning the current of his thoughts into a much less

48 Married or Single?

dangerous channel, and holding out the note for his perusal.

“Thursday week. Let’s see; what is there for Thursday week, eh?”

“We dine with the Thompson-Thompsons in Portland Place.”

“Oh dear me, yes, so we do,” querulously. “What a confounded nuisance!” in a tone of intense exasperation. “Can’t we throw them over?”

But his daughter gave him no encouragement, knowing full well the enormity of throwing people over when a better engagement presented itself, and that such proceedings were not countenanced by good society in Vanity Fair.

So Mr. West (who was cheered by another coroneted invitation-card) was fain to submit with what grace he could muster.

*

*

*

*

*

Two Visits and a Letter. 49

The next morning Miss West resolved upon a bold step. She pleaded a headache as an excuse from attending Sandown, and as soon as she had seen her parent safely off the premises, she hurried upstairs, dressed herself very plainly, put a black veil in her pocket—also a well-filled purse—and, walking to a short distance, took a hansom for Waterloo Station. This time she travelled first class, of course, and hired a fly to take her to the farm—at least, to the lane leading to the farm—and there to wait, in case Mr. Holt was unable to drive her back. She desired to give every one an agreeable surprise.

Mrs. Holt, who was in the kitchen shelling peas into a yellow bowl, gave a little scream when she beheld Mrs. Wynne standing on the threshold, between her and the sunshine, and, upsetting half the pods, rushed at her

50 Married or Single?

hospitably, wiping her hands on her apron, and assuring her that “she was more welcome than the flowers in May. Baby was well, and growing a rare size, but Mr. Wynne was out; he and the farmer had gone away together just after breakfast, and would not be back till late, and did ever anything happen so contrary?”

Her square brow knit into lines of disappointment when the young lady, in answer to her eager queries, informed her that she was not come to stay—that, in fact, she was going to Ireland in two or three days with her father and a party of friends. He had taken the shooting of a large estate in the south, and was most anxious to inspect it.

“Ay, dearie, dearie me!” said Mrs. Holt, after an eloquent pause, “and what *will* Mr. Wynne say to that? I’m

Two Visits and a Letter. 51

thinking he will not be for letting you go," and she shook her head dubiously.

This was precisely the subject that Madeline had come to discuss with him, and he was away for the day. How excessively provoking and tiresome!

Mrs. Kane had been won over with money, Mrs. Harper with valuable presents, and the hint of an invitation to stay at Belgrave Square. There remained but Laurence to deal with. He really must learn to be patient—to wait for the auspicious moment when, having gained the whole of her father's confidence and affection, he began to realize that she was so absolutely necessary to his happiness and to his social success that he could never spare her. Then, and not till then, would she throw herself into his arms and confess to him that she was married to Laurence

52 Married or Single?

Wynne. Laurence and the baby would be brought to Belgrave Square in triumph, and share her lot in basking in the sun of wealth and luxury. This was Mrs. Wynne's nice little programme, and ten times a day she repeated to herself this formula—"Laurence must wait."

She kissed her little boy, and praised his rosy cheeks, and asked many questions about her husband, and was so surprised to hear that he wrote for hours and hours; but Mrs. Holt remarked that she took no interest now in the chickens, calves, or dogs—or, what she once found irresistible, the dairy!

Also Mrs. Holt's quick woman's eye did not fail to notice her blazing rings when she pulled off her gloves, her valuable little wristlet-watch, which she consulted nervously from time to time, her plain but expensive dress, that rustled

Two Visits and a Letter. 53

when she moved. Ah! she could see—although she tried not to show it—that Mrs. Wynne had changed. Her mind was possessed now by riches, and he, poor young man, would never be able to keep her contented, now she had had the taste of money, and knew what it was to be a great lady; and Mrs. Holt shook her head wistfully, as she made a red-currant tart. Meanwhile Madeline carried baby down to the gate and looked out for Laurence, but no Laurence came, and baby was surprisingly heavy. Then she went round the garden. Oh, how small it looked somehow, and there was horrid green weed on the pool! Then she made her way into their sitting-room, with its old glass book-case, brass-faced clock, samplers hanging on the walls, and plain red tiles underfoot. A dainty summer breeze was playing with the

54 Married or Single?

white curtains through the open lattice, and the great hollyhocks and sunflowers were rearing their heads and endeavouring to peep in from the garden. There was Laurence's pipe; there, in a corner, stood the stick which had betrayed him; and there was his writing, just as he had left it—ruled sermon paper. No, not a letter! What was it all about? And she took it up and glanced over it. It was some rubbish, headed, "Middle-aged Matrons." How absurd!

Then, on the spur of the moment, she called in Mrs. Holt, and consigned Master Harry to her motherly arms, whilst she sat down to indite a letter to Laurence, with his own favourite pen and at his own table.

"DEAR LAURENCE" (she said),

"I came down on purpose to see you, and am so dreadfully disappointed to

Two Visits and a Letter. 55

find you are out, for I dare not wait, and I had so much to say to you. I am delighted to find baby so grown, and to hear such good accounts of yourself. I believe you were at Belgrave Square yesterday. Laurence, how could you be so rash? Fortunately, no one suspected who you were, or that you were anything to Miss West. I feel quite another person than Miss West now that I am down in the country, and looking out of the window in front of me into this dear old garden and the far-away wooded hills.

“I feel as if money was nothing in comparison to youth and domesticity and peace, and that I could be happy here for ever with you; but I know that, once back in my own boudoir this very self-same evening, I shall change my mind again, and look upon rustic life as intolerable—a living death, a being buried

56 Married or Single?

alive without a fashionable funeral. Money and money's worth I must attain; love I have. I wish to command both—love and money. We know what love is without money, don't we? I shall never, never change to you, Laurence, you may rely on that.

“I received your last letter safely, and have laid to heart all you say; but, dear, dear Laurence, you must let me take my own time with papa. I will tell him sooner or later; but, indeed, I am the best judge of how and when and where. You used to say I was foreseeing and prudent and wise, in the days of No. 2. Surely I am not changed in three months' time! Leave it all to me. He will come round yet, and, like the good people in the fairy-tales, we shall live happy ever after. On Sunday night we all go to Ireland by the mail from Euston. It

Two Visits and a Letter. 57

is quite a sudden idea. Papa has given up the idea of the Scotch moors, and was talked into taking this shooting and deer-forest and castle by an agreeable Irish nobleman he met at his club. There is every inducement to sportsmen, from red deer to black cock, as well as three thousand acres of ground and a castle.

“We are to have a succession of visitors. I hope to do great things in three months, and will write to you every week and report progress.

“Ever, dear Laurence, your loving wife,
“M. W.”

His loving wife put this effusion into an envelope, directed it, and placed it on the mantelpiece, where it would be sure to catch his eye, and then she felt considerably relieved in heart and mind, and had tea in the kitchen with Mrs. Holt,

58 Married or Single?

turning the cakes and praising the butter, and softening Mrs. Holt's feelings the longer she stayed in her company. Then she had a confidential chat about baby and his clothes, and placed twenty pounds in her listener's hand for his wardrobe, in spite of that good woman's protestation that it was just five times too much. She also made the farmer's wife a substantial present of money, telling her very prettily, with tears in her eyes, that it was not in return for her kindness, for no sum could repay *that*, but as a small token of gratitude.

By various means she reinstated herself in Mrs. Holt's good graces, and having hugged the baby and kissed him over and over again, and taken a hearty leave of her hostess, she set off briskly on foot to where the patient fly awaited her. She paused at the end of the lane, and

looked back on the Holt farm. It was a homely, sequestered spot, buried in fields and trees, and very peaceful; but it looked somehow more insignificant—shabbier than she had fancied. How small the windows were! How close it stood to the big yard, with its swarming poultry and calves and dirty duck-pond! And what horrible knives and spoons Mrs. Holt used, and what fearful shoes she wore! However, she was a good old soul, and had taken great care of baby. Then she once more turned her back on the farm, and set her face towards her father's luxurious mansion. Luckily for herself, she was home before him—was dressed, and sitting half buried in a chair, engrossed in a novel, when he returned in high good humour. He had been winning and losing in the best of company, and was very eloquent about a

60 Married or Single?

certain Roman prince who had been uncommonly pleasant, and had said he “would like to be presented to you, Madeline!” His little hard head was so full of this new acquaintance that he had not room for a thought as to where or how his daughter had spent the day. Indeed, from all evidence to the contrary, she might never have been out of the house.

Laurence found Madeline’s letter staring at him from the mantelpiece when he came home. He snatched it eagerly, and devoured it then and there, and as he came to the last line his sensations were those of exceedingly bitter disappointment — yes, and something more, he was hurt. It seemed to him that through the epistle ran an under-current of jaunty indifference, and this cut him to the quick.

Two Visits and a Letter. 61

And she was going to Ireland for three months ! Well, at any rate, he would see her off ; a railway station was open to the public. She need not necessarily see him ; but he would see her. The next day he carried out his intention, travelling up to town early in the morning, visiting his chambers, dining with his friend Jessop, and being in good time to speed the Irish mail at Euston. He watched and waited, and saw many parties approach ; but yet not his particular party. They did not appear until within five minutes of the departure of the train.

And what a fuss they made ! More than all their predecessors put together. There was one footman running for tickets, another being carried madly along the platform in tow of two powerful setters, one retainer had the booking of the luggage, another was arranging the

62 Married or Single?

interior of their Pullman sleeping-car, and then the party came up to it, and Laurence beheld his father-in-law for the first time—a neat, trim, bustling little man, talking vociferously and gesticulating about Lady Rachel's luggage. There was a very well-dressed, dark little woman, not young, but juvenile in air and style, who laughed and talked incessantly to a big man in a tweed suit, and looked at Mr. West with contemptuous grimaces, and shrugged her shapely shoulders. There was a "lout" in wonderful knickerbockers—so he mentally ticketed Lord Tony. There was a tall girl in a sort of long racing-coat. There were two lady's-maids; and last, but not least, there was Madeline—Madeline so altered that he could scarcely believe his eyes—Madeline in a regal travelling-cloak, carrying a Chinese lap-dog, giving directions to

Two Visits and a Letter. 63

hurrying footmen and maids, and dispensing smiling adieux among a group of young men who had come to see them off—meaning Miss West. This was surely not his Madeline—the little school-girl he had married, the devoted, struggling, hard-working wife and mother, late of 2, Solferino Place. He stood back for a moment in the shadow of the book-stall, and realized for the first time the immense gulf that divided him from Mr. West's heiress—the great yawning chasm which lay between him and Madeline. What would fill it—what? He could think of no bridge but money.

Very poignant were his thoughts as he stood thus—poor, aloof, and alone, whilst his radiant wife made her beaming farewells from the window of the Pullman car.

“She should say good-bye to him too,”

64 Married or Single?

he declared to himself, with sudden fierce resolve, and, stepping forward, he stood out in the full light, a little apart from the gay group who were now removing their hats with a real or simulated air of regret as the great long train, that was to carry the popular heiress westward, began slowly to move. Madeline smiled and nodded and waved her hand. But who was that standing a little aside, farther down the platform? It was Laurence—Laurence, whom she had not beheld for three months. It gave her quite a shock to see him—but a pleasant shock, that sent the blood tingling through her veins.

How well he looked!—quite himself again; and how well he contrasted with these gilded youths whom she had just (she hoped) seen the last of! She would have blown him a kiss had she dared; but her father's little beady eyes were upon

her, and she could only sit and look—she might not even bow! Then, with sudden compunction, and justly alarmed by the expression on his face, she leant quickly out of the window and nodded and smiled.

The other young men accepted this final signal with demonstrations of rapture. Little did they guess that it was not for them, but for that quiet, gentlemanly-looking fellow a few yards to their left. If they were not aware of this, he was.

“Who is that man on the platform,” said Lady Rachel, “that looks as if he was seeing us off too? There is no one else in the car but ourselves.”

“Oh, I’m sure I don’t know,” responded Mr. West. “There are heaps of people going over, though I dare say he belongs to the Ravenstale party. Lord

66 Married or Single?

Ravenstale is in the train. It would not surprise me if it were his nephew, Cosmo Woodwing—aristocratic-looking sort of chap—and took a good stare at you, eh, Maddie?” facetiously. “Will know you again next time he sees you?”—highly delighted at his own conceit. “I suppose you have no idea who he is, eh?”

Madeline had an excellent idea of who he was, but this was no time to confide her secret to her parent—better to save this little domestic bomb for a more discreet opportunity.

Madeline had a shrewd idea that the mysterious gentleman who had taken a good long look at her—the presumable Lord Cosmo Woodwing—was her own husband!

CHAPTER XVII.

GONE TO IRELAND.

LAURENCE WYNNE stood upon the platform and watched the Irish mail—"The Wild Irishman"—wind its great long body slowly out of the station—watched till the red light, like a fiery eye, became smaller and smaller, and disappeared from view. Then he hurried off to Waterloo to catch his own train—which he missed—and, going by the next, walked from Guildford, a distance of twelve miles, arriving home at one o'clock in the morning, to the intense relief of Mrs. Holt, who had been sitting up for him

68 Married or Single?

in a nightcap of portentous dimensions, and who, seeing that he looked tired and dusty, and what she mentally termed “down,” was disposed to be a very mother to him, even to setting a cold supper before him at that unparalleled and improper hour, and staying him with a flagon of her own home-brewed ale—a sure token of favour.

“And so she’s gone!” she exclaimed at last, when she could absolutely contain herself no longer. “Actually gone to Ireland.”

“Yes, Mrs. Holt, she is gone,” acquiesced her lodger, coolly.

“And goodness knows when she will come back,” she continued indignantly. “Dear, dear, dear! I wonder what *my* master would say if I’d a done the like—just walking off and leaving him and an infant to fend for themselves; but I

suppose fine folk is different, and don't mind?" giving her cap-frills a mighty toss.

Laurence said nothing. He was not going to tell this worthy and virtuously irate matron, that he did mind very much. No matter how he felt himself, he would have every one else think well of Maddie. He would hardly admit to his own heart that she was not *quite* perfect, that he was beginning to feel sorely jealous of her father, her fine surroundings, and her fashionable friends. However, there was no use in thinking; what he had to do was to work, and endeavour to win for himself name, fame, and fortune.

The next morning he set himself to make a real beginning. He packed up his slender belongings, he took his last walk round the fields and garden with farmer Holt, he consigned his son to the

care of his kind hostess for the present, and, promising to run down often and look them up, he, in his turn, was taken to the station by the chestnut colt, and departed to make a fresh start in life, whilst the burly farmer stood on the platform and flourished his adieux with a red-spotted handkerchief. Then, returning slowly home, agreed with the missus in finding the place "summat lonely-like now," in missing their late inmate, and in praising him up to the skies. Mrs. Holt was inclined to improve the occasion by drawing invidious comparisons between Mr. Wynne and his wife. "She was not like him—he had more true worth in his little finger than she had in the whole of her body," etc.

But the worthy master, who had not been blind to Madeline's pretty face and fascinating smiles, would not listen for a

moment to such treason, and told his better half, rather sharply, to "hold her tongue!"

Laurence Wynne took up his quarters in the Temple temporarily—in a set of gloomy old chambers, with small, narrow windows and small panes, looking out on nothing in particular—at any rate he had no view to distract his attention from his work, and of work he had plenty.

His friend Jessop (unlike some so-called friends), having got a good start up the ladder of law, reached back a hand to his struggling schoolfellow; and an opening—a good opening—was all that his struggling schoolfellow required. His brains, his ceaseless industry, his good address, and his handsome appearance did the rest. He was far cleverer than his friend Jessop, and had twice his perseverance and talent for steady application.

72 Married or Single?

Jessop could keep a bar dinner in a roar of laughter, but Wynne could hold, as it were, in his hand, the eyes and ears of a jury. He had a natural gift for oratory; he had a clear, sonorous voice; he was never at a loss for a word—the right word; never said too much, or too little; never lost an opportunity of making a point, or of driving home an argument. In short, among the juniors he was a pearl of price. His brilliant articles of biting satire, which were read by every one, had brought his name up, and his name had been speedily followed by his appearance in person—his appearance in a successful case. In short, a tide in his affairs had come, and he had taken it at the flood, and the little skiff “success” was sailing over the waves in gallant style.

He had been most fortunate in one or

two minor cases ; he could not afford to be careless, like great men who had made their reputations. He began to be spoken of as a very rising junior, and to be consulted on crotchety points of law, to be listened to whenever he opened his lips, to be asked out to many professional dinners, and to receive—oh, joy!—not a few briefs on which the name of Laurence Wynne was inscribed in a round legal hand.

Yes, he was getting on rapidly. He could now afford to pay well for the maintenance of Master Wynne, to make handsome presents to the Holts, to allow himself new clothes and books, and the luxury of belonging to a good club.

And what about Mrs. Wynne all this time ?

Madeline was rather agitated by so unexpectedly beholding her husband on

74 Married or Single?

the platform, the night they left for Ireland. Her heart beat fast, and her eyes were rather dim as they lost sight of his figure in the crowd.

“Poor Laurence! How fond he was of her,” she said to herself, with a sharp pang of compunction. “Fancy his coming up all that way, for just *one* glimpse, one little look across the crowd!” But, latterly, Madeline West had been so overwhelmed with attention, that she now took many things as a matter of course, and but a proper tribute to her own importance.

She and Lady Rachel occupied the same sleeping compartment, and her ladyship, who was an old and experienced traveller, wasted no time in gazing dreamily out of the window like Madeline, but took off her hat and dress and lay down in her berth, and was soon

asleep, whilst the other sat with her eyes fixed on the dusky country through which they were passing, asking herself many disturbing questions, and fighting out a battle in her own breast between Laurence and luxury. At times she had almost resolved to tell her father all within the next twelve hours, and to accept the consequences, whatever they might be. She was wrong to deceive him; she was wrong to leave Laurence and the child. Yes; she would do the right thing at last — confess and go back.

With this decision laboriously arrived at, her mind was more at ease—a load seemed lifted from her brain; and she laid her head on her pillow at last and fell asleep.

But morning brings counsel—we do not say that it always brings wisdom.

76 Married or Single?

In the cool, very cool dawn, as she sat on the deck of the *Ireland* and watched the sun rise and the shores of Erin rise into view, her courage ebbed away; and as she partook of a cup of hot coffee at Kingsbridge Station, and encountered her father, who was exceedingly short in his temper, owing to a bad night's rest, her good intentions melted as snow before the sun. No, no, she told herself; she must wait until her parent was in a more genial, indulgent mood. To speak now would be fatal, even supposing there was an opportunity for a few moments' *tête-à-tête*.

The party travelled down at express speed to Mallow Junction, and from there a short rail journey brought them near their destination. It was four o'clock on a superb August afternoon as they drove up to Clane Castle. The

owner and agent had not misled the new tenants; it *was* a castle, a fine commanding structure tucked under the wing of a great purple mountain, and was approached by an avenue that wound for a full Irish mile through a delightful demesne. What oaks! what beeches! what green glades and scuttling rabbits! what cover for woodcock! and, outlined against the sky-line on the mountain, was that a deer?

The exclamations of pleasure and astonishment from his daughter and his guests made Mr. West's tongue wag freely.

“Yes; it's a fine place. I said, ‘None of your picnic shanties for me.’ I said, ‘I must have a decent house and a fair head of game—money no object,’” he explained volubly, as he strutted before the party into a noble

dining-room, where a very *recherché* meal awaited them.

The travellers, fortified by an excellent repast, and filled with an agreeable sense of well-being, repaired to their several chambers to get rid of their dusty garments, and met once more in the library, and sallied forth to see the place, Mr. West acting as guide and *circerone*, and conducting his followers as if he had been born on the premises. The eyes of appreciative sportsmen sparkled as they took in the miles of mountain, the forests, the extent of heather, stretching widely to the horizon, and felt more than ever, that little West, by Jove! knew what he was about when he asked a fellow to shoot, and did you right well.

Besides the far-reaching mountains, there were other attractions—a lake and

boathouse, a fine garden and pleasure-ground, a tennis-court, and—oh, joy!—a capital billiard-table. Every one expressed their delight with the castle, the scenery, the weather, and soon settled down to enjoy themselves in their several ways.

The twelfth of August produced a splendid bag of grouse, surpassing even the head-keeper's fondest prediction. Every one of the neighbouring "quality" called of their own free will. There were celebrated tennis-parties, and dinners at the Castle (Mr. West had brought his own cook), and the fame of the excellent shooting went far and near. Mr. West was jubilant; he felt a grand seigneur. Never had he been a personage of such importance, and he actually began to look down on his London acquaintances.

"The shooting is A1 — every one

80 Married or Single?

knows that," he said. "Courtenay wants to know *how* I like the place?—a deuce deal better than I like him; and Dafford writes to ask if I can give him a day or two? I'm not very hot on Dafford. He wasn't over and above civil, and he never got his sister, Lady Dovetail, to call; but he'd like to make use of me now. If I'm not good enough for him in London, he isn't good enough for me here. Oh no, Mr. Dafford; you don't come to Clane Castle!" And putting his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat, Mr. West trotted up and down his daughter's morning-room exuberantly happy.

Madeline was happy, too, but from other causes. The lovely scenery, the free yet luxurious life, the entire novelty of her surroundings, the impulsive gay-spirited gentry, the finest peasantry in the world, with their soft brogue, wit,

blarney, and dark eyes, all enchanted her. The only little clouds upon her sky were a spirit of discontent among her English retinue, and a certain indefinable coolness and constraint in Laurence's weekly letter.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WANTED—A REASON.

THE guests at the castle were, as notified in a local paper, Lady Rachel Jenkins and Mr. Jenkins, the Honourable Mrs. Leach, Lord Anthony Foster, Miss Pamela Pace, Miss Peggy Lumley, Captain Vansittart, and Major Mostyn, of the Royal Sedleitz Dragoons.

The Honourable Mrs. Leach was a handsome widow, whose income was much beneath her requirements. She was acquainted with some colonials, who had come home in the same ship as Mr. West, and was indebted to them

for an introduction to her present comfortable quarters. She had a smooth, slow sort of manner, a pair of wonderfully expressive eyes—and her own little plans. It did not suit her to walk with the guns, or join in long expeditions, entailing wear and tear of clothes, nerves, complexion, and tissues. She much preferred to lounge over a novel in the grounds, having breakfasted in her own room, and would appear at teatime before the battered, sun-burnt, sun-blistered company, a miracle of cool grace, in a costume to correspond. And her brilliant appearance of an evening was a pleasure that was generally looked forward to. What toilettes!—so rich, so well-chosen and becoming! What diamonds! (Yes; but these were the best French paste.) She made herself pleasant to every one, especially to Mr.

84 Married or Single?

West, and treated Madeline almost as if she were some fond elder sister.

Miss Pamela Pace was excessively lively—the soul of the party, always ready to shoot, ride, or fish; to play billiards, gooseberry, or the banjo; to dance or to act charades. She had a fund of riddles, games, and ghost stories. Without being pretty, she was neat, smart, and a general favourite.

Miss Lumley was her cousin and her foil—tall, fair, statuesque, and silent. However, she was a capital tennis and billiard player, an untiring pedestrian; and, as Lady Rachel talked enough for two ordinary women, she made up for Miss Lumley's shortcomings.

* Lady Rachel was most anxious to get her brother settled—married to a nice girl, such as Madeline, with a large fortune, and she intended to forward the

match in every way. She lost no opportunity of sounding Tony's praises to Madeline, or of plying him with encouragement and advice. Advice, especially given as such for his own good, he shirked, as a child does physic. He admired Miss West. She was unaffected; there was no nonsense about her; she was handsome and ladylike. She would accept him, of course; and he really might do worse. He did not particularly want to marry her, or any one; but his income, no matter how well contrived and cut, was far too small for a man of his position. And money was a pleasant thing.

Wound up by his anxious sister, Lord Tony had asked for and obtained Mr. West's permission to speak to his daughter, and now the only thing that remained to do was to ask the young

86 Married or Single ?

lady to ratify the treaty. They had been nearly three weeks in Ireland, whilst this affair was quietly brewing.

Madeline had no suspicion of her father's wishes, or her suitor's intentions ; such an idea would have filled her—as it subsequently did—with horror. She liked dancing and tennis, and amusing herself as much as other young women of her age ; but the notion of any one falling in love with her, in her new and attractive character, never once entered her brain. Pretty speeches and compliments she laughed at and turned aside ; and it was generally mooted that the Australian heiress was as cold as the typical iceberg, and had a genius for administering the most crushing snubs if any one ventured on to the borderland, yea, the very suburbs of love-making ; and it had been hinted that either there was some pauper

lover in the background, or that Miss West was waiting for a duke—English or foreign—to lay his strawberry leaves at her feet. She thought Lord Tony extremely plain, and rather stupid; but he was so easily entertained, and cheery, and helped to make things go off well, that she was glad he formed one of the party. She had seen so much of him in London, she knew him better than any of their young men acquaintances; and he was always so good-tempered, so unassuming, and so confidential, that she entertained quite a sisterly regard for him.

Of Lord Anthony's present views and intentions she had no more idea than her pet Chinese spaniel. If he was *épris* with any one, it was with the dashing Pamela, who told his fortune by cards, and played him even at billiards; and his proposal came upon her without any

88 Married or Single?

preparation, and like a bolt from the blue. The bolt fell in this fashion, and on a certain sleepy Sunday afternoon.

Sunday at Clane had many empty hours. Mr. West was old-fashioned, and set his face against shooting, tennis, billiards, or even that curate's own game—croquet. The hours after lunch were spent in smoking, sleeping, novel-reading, devouring fruit in the big garden, or sitting under the lime-trees. It was thus that Lord Anthony found Madeline, surveying the misty haze of a hot August afternoon with a pair of abstracted eyes. Mr. West had given him a hint of her whereabouts, and that here was the hour, and he was the man!

“She is a cold, undemonstrative, distant sort of girl,” he explained. “She has never had a fancy, that I know of” (no, certainly as yet, he had not known

of it). “She likes you, I am sure; it will be all plain sailing.” And, thus encouraged, the suitor figuratively put to sea.

Madeline sat alone under the lime-trees in a low wicker chair, having been deserted by Lady Rachel, who had gone to have a comfortable snooze ere tea-time.

It was a drowsy afternoon; the bees buzzed lazily over a bed of mignonette, which sent its fragrance far and near. Madeline’s book lay neglected in her lap. Her thoughts were far from it and Clane; they were with a certain hard-working barrister in London, who had written her a very rough, outspoken letter. Poor Laurence! Why could he not wait? Why could he not have patience? He was beginning to get on so well. She had seen a long review of one of his

90 Married or Single?

articles in *Tooth and Nail*. He was becoming quite a literary celebrity.

And, once he was up the ladder, even a few rungs, she would not feel the change so bitter, supposing her father was furious and implacable. Of course it would be a change! And she sighed as she smoothed out her cambric gown—which had cost eighteen guineas—with a pretty, delicate hand, laden with magnificent rings. Could it be possible that those soft white hands had ever blackened grates and made beds and washed up plates? Oh, such greasy plates and dishes!

“You seem to be in a day-dream, Miss West,” said Lord Anthony, as he approached, “and all the rest of the folk have gone to sleep.”

“Have they?” she exclaimed. “Well, one cannot wonder! It is a broiling

afternoon, and, after that long sermon, you must make allowances.”

“Oh, I’m always making allowances. I’m an easy-going sort of fellow, you know,” and he cast himself into a well-cushioned chair. “I want to have a little talk with you.” Hitching this chair nearer he added, “May I?”

“Why, of course! But are we in a talking humour? Isn’t it rather hot? Pray don’t bore yourself to entertain me! I can always amuse myself,” and she slowly agitated her great green fan.

“Yes; I suppose you can say ‘My mind to me a kingdom is’?” he asked, with a smile.

“I think I can,” she answered languidly.

“I wish *I* could say as much. My mind is a poor, barren, unpopulated country. I should like to take a trip

92 Married or Single?

into your territory, and share your pleasant thoughts, Miss West!" then suddenly spurred by a recollection of a solemn promise to his sister, and that he was wasting a golden opportunity, "I have something important to say to you."

"To say to *me*?" she echoed, with raised brows. "What can it be? What makes you look so strange? You are not feeling ill, are you?"

"Ill! No; but my mind is ill at ease. Can you not form an idea why?" leaning forward as he spoke, and looking straight into her eyes.

His look was an illumination to Madeleine. But as yet she did not think of herself; she mentally glanced at lively Pamela, with her high spirits and low stature. She had seen her present companion carry his rather boisterous attentions to that young lady's shrine.

She amused him, and his loud, long laugh often resounded in her neighbourhood. He was come to ask for her good offices; but she did not suppose that Miss Pam would be unusually difficult to win.

“Oh, I think I have an idea now,” she murmured, with a significant smile. “I have guessed.”

“You have?” he replied, in a tone of great relief. “And—and, may I venture to hope?”

“I really cannot tell you. But I see no reason why you should not,” she returned reassuringly.

“Madeline”—now moving his chair a whole foot nearer, and suddenly taking her hand—“you have made me the happiest of men!”

“I don’t think I quite understand you,” she replied, struggling to withdraw

94 Married or Single?

her fingers, and feeling desperately uncomfortable.

“Then I must speak out more plainly. I want you to promise to be my wife.”

For a second she stared at him as if she could not credit her ears. Then she suddenly wrenched her fingers away, sprang to her feet, and stood facing him with crimson cheeks.

“What do you mean? Are you—mad?” she asked sharply.

“Mad?—no!” replied her suitor, both amazed and affronted. “One would think I was a dangerous lunatic, the way you behave. I am quite sane, and in deadly earnest. I have your father’s good wishes, Rachel’s good wishes——”

“My father’s good wishes!” she interrupted, her mind in a perfect tumult at this totally unlooked-for dilemma.

“What is the matter with you, Miss

West? Why are you so upset and agitated? Am I so totally unworthy? Is there anything so extravagantly strange in my wishing to marry you?"

"Oh no, no!"—endeavouring to control her feelings, and not give herself away. "But—but——" A scarlet wave rushed into her cheeks. But what would Laurence say?

"Is it to be 'Yes' or 'No'?" he pleaded.

She simply shook her head, and drew back a step or two.

He had never been so near to loving this tall pretty girl, standing under the lime-trees with flushed, averted face, as now, when she shook her head.

"At least you will give me *reason*," he demanded, rather sulkily.

As the words left his lips he saw an odd change pass across her face, an expression that he could not understand.

96 Married or Single?

It was a look half of fear, half of contemptuous derision.

"There is no reason," she answered quietly, "beyond the usual one in a similar case. I do not wish to marry you."

"And why?" he asked, after an appreciable pause.

"Well, really, I have never thought about you, Lord Anthony, but as a pleasant acquaintance. As an acquaintance I like you very much," she answered, with astounding calmness. "An acquaintance—but nothing more." And she turned to take up her parasol.

Opposition always roused Lord Anthony; it acted as a spur. In a short five minutes he saw everything from his sister's point of view, and had suddenly developed a passion for Miss West.

"Every marriage begins by an acquaintance. Perhaps in time," he urged—

“in a few short months, my dearest Madeline——”

“I am not your ‘dearest Madeline,’ Lord Anthony,” she interrupted quickly. “Pray consider the subject closed once for all; and remember, for the future, that I am Miss West.”

She was getting angry with his persistency. He was getting angry with her persistency.

There ensued a long silence, unbroken by speech. And at last he said—

“There is some other fellow, of course. You are engaged already.”

“I am not. Oh, Pamela, I did not see you”—as that vivacious young lady suddenly came upon the scene with a strong escort of dogs.

From her window she had noted the conference, and had hastily descended in order to discover what it might

portend. A proposal! Well, if he had proposed, he had *not* been accepted, she remarked to herself complacently.

They both looked confused and ill at ease. Evidently they had been quarrelling. Lord Anthony was ridiculously red, and Madeline was white as a sheet.

“How delightfully cool and comfortable you two look!” she mendaciously ejaculated, sinking into Madeline’s chair with a gesture of exhaustion. “This is quite the nicest place, under these motherly old trees. I’ve been trying to sleep, but it did not come off. I was driven quite frantic by a diabolical blue-bottle, that would not keep away from my face.”

“I’m sure I don’t wonder,” said Lord Anthony, who was recovering his good temper, which was never lost for long.

“And so I came out. You will have tea here, Maddie, won’t you, like a duck?”

“I’m not sure that ducks care for tea,” rejoined Madeline. “Their weakness is snails. But I’ll run in and order it. It must be after five.” And in another minute her tall white figure was half-way to the castle, and Miss Pamela and Lord Anthony were alone.

Both were eager to question the other in a delicate, roundabout way. Strange to say, the man got out his query first. Throwing himself once more into a chair, and crossing his legs, he said—

“Girls know girls and their affairs, as men know men, and are up to their little games. Now, you saw a lot of Miss West in town. Same dressmaker, same dentist, same bootmaker. Look here, now; I want to know something.” And

he bent over and gazed into Miss Pam's pale little dancing eyes.

"I am quite at your service," she answered smilingly. "Her waist is twenty inches. She takes a longer skirt than you would think. She has no false teeth, and only a little stuffing in one back molar. Her size in shoes is fours."

"Bosh! What do I care about her teeth and her shoes? I want to know—and I'll do as much for you some day—if Miss West has any hanger-on—any lover loafing round? Of course I know she had heaps of Johnnies who admired her. But did she seem sweet on them? 'Lookers-on see most of the game.'"

"Yes, when there is any game to see," retorted the young lady. "In this case there was none. Or, if there was, it was double dummy."

"No one?" he said incredulously.

“No one,” she answered. “She talks like an old grandmother, who has been through every phase of life; talks in the abstract, of course. She has never, as far as I know, and in the language of romance, ‘smiled on any suitor.’”

“Most extraordinary!” muttered Lord Anthony. “A new woman who bars men. However, there is always the one exception; and, by George”—to himself—“I’ll have another try!”

CHAPTER XIX.

A DISAGREEABLE INTERVIEW.

“WELL !” said Mr. West, when he found himself alone in the smoking-room with Lord Anthony. How much can be expressed in that exclamation.

“It was not well, sir. She will have nothing to say to me. I had no luck.”

“Do you mean with Maddie ?” exclaimed her father, in a tone of fretful amazement.

“Yes. I had a long talk with her, and she won’t have anything to say to me !”

“What—what reason did she give

A Disagreeable Interview. 103

you?" demanded Mr. West. "What reason, I say?"

"None, except that she did not wish to marry me; and she seemed to think that reason *enough*."

"And did you not press her?"

"It was of no use; but, all the same, I intend to try again—that is, if there is no one else, and Miss West has no attachment elsewhere."

"Attachment elsewhere? Nonsense!" irritably. "Why, she was at *school* till I came home—till she met me on the steamer with her governess! You saw her yourself; so you may put that out of your head. She's a mere girl, and does not know her own mind; but I know mine, and if she marries to please me, I'll settle forty thousand pounds on her on her wedding day, and allow her five thousand a year. It's not many

girls in England who have as much pinned to their petticoat; and she will have considerably more at my death. If you stick to Maddie, you will see she will marry you eventually. She knows you, and is getting used to you—coming in and out in London; and you have a great pull over other men, staying here in the same house, with lots of wet days perhaps!”

The following morning Madeline was sent for by her father. He felt that he could speak with more authority from the 'vantage ground of the hearthrug in his own writing-room; and after breakfast was the time he selected for the audience. Evidently Madeline had no idea of what was awaiting her, for she came up to him and laid her hand upon his arm, and gave him an extra morning kiss.

A Disagreeable Interview. 105

“I suppose it’s about this picnic to the Devil’s Pie-dish?” she began.

In no part of the world has the devil so much and such a various property as in Ireland—glens, mountains, bridges, punch-bowls, bits, ladders—there is scarcely a county in which he has not some possessions—and they say he is a resident landlord.

Mr. West propped himself against the mantelpiece and surveyed her critically. She was certainly a most beautiful creature—in her parent’s fond eyes—and quite fitted to be sister-in-law to a duke.

“It’s not about the picnic; that must be put off, the day has broken. It’s something far more important. Ahem!” clearing his throat. “What’s all *this* about you and Foster?”

“Why?” she stammered, colouring

106 Married or Single ?

deeply, and struck by a peculiar ring in his voice.

“ *Why?* ” impatiently. “ He tells me that he proposed to you yesterday, and you refused him point-blank ; and now, in my turn, *I* ask why ? ”

Madeline was silent. She began to feel very uncomfortable, and her heart beat fearfully fast.

“ Well, is it true ? ” he demanded sharply.

“ Yes, quite true,” fiddling with her bangles.

“ And may I know why you have said *no* to a highly eligible young man, of a station far above your own, the son of a duke—a man young, agreeable, whose name has never appeared in any flagrant society scandal, who is well-principled and—and—good-looking—a suitor who has my warmest approval ? Come now.”

A Disagreeable Interview. 107

And he took off his glasses and rapped them on his thumb nail.

“I do not wish to marry,” she replied in a low voice.

“And you *do* wish to drive me out of my senses ! What foolery, what tommy rot ! Of course, you *must* marry some day—you are bound to as my heiress; and I look to you to do something decent, and to bring me in an equivalent return for my outlay.”

“And you wish me to marry Lord Anthony ?” inquired his unhappy daughter, pale to the lips. Oh, if she could but muster up courage to confess the truth ! But she dared not, with those fiery little eyes fixed upon her so fiercely. “Father, I cannot. I cannot, indeed !” she whispered, wringing her hands together in an agony.

“Why ?” he demanded in a hoarse, dry voice.

108 Married or Single ?

“ Would you barter me and your money for a title ? ” she cried, plucking up some spirit in her desperation, “ as if I was not a living creature, and had no feeling. I *have* feeling. I have a heart; and it is useless for you to attempt to control it—it is out of your power ! ”

This unexpected speech took her parent aback. She spoke with such passionate vehemence that he scarcely recognized his gay, cool, smiling, and unemotional Madeline.

This imperious girl, with trembling hands, sharply knit brows, and low, agitated voice, was entirely another person. This was not Madeline, his everyday daughter. At last it dawned upon his mind that there was something behind it all, some curious hidden reason in the background, some secret cause for this astonishing behaviour ! Suddenly

A Disagreeable Interview. 109

gripping her arm in a vice-like grasp, as an awful possibility stirred his inflammable spirit, he whispered through his teeth—

“Who is it?”

“Who is who?” she gasped faintly.

Ah! now it was coming. She shook as if she had the ague.

“Who is this scoundrel, this low-born adventurer that you are in love with? Is it the man you knew at school? Is it the damned dancing-master, or some half-starved curate? Is it him you want to marry? Madeline, on your oath,” shaking her in his furious excitement and passion of apprehension, “is it him you want to marry?” he reiterated.

Madeline turned cold, but she looked full into the enraged face, so close to hers, and as he repeated, “On your oath, remember!” she answered with unfaltering and distinctly audible voice, “On

110 Married or Single?

my oath—*no!*” She spoke the truth, too! Was she not married to him already? Oh, if her father only guessed it! She dared not speculate on the idea! He would be worse, far worse than her worst anticipations. She could *never* tell him now.

“Father, I have said ‘No,’” she continued. “Let go my hand, you hurt me.” With the utterance of the last word she broke down and collapsed upon the nearest chair, sobbing hysterically.

“What the devil are you crying for?” he demanded angrily. “What I’ve said and done, I’ve done for your good. Take your own time, in reason; but marry you *shall*, and a title. Foster is the man of my choice. I don’t see what you can bring against him. We will all live together, and, for my own part, I should

A Disagreeable Interview. 111

like it. You go to no poorer home, you become a lady of rank,—what more can any girl want? Money as much as she can spend, a husband and a father who hit it off to a T, both only too anxious to please her in every possible way, rank, and riches; what more would you have, eh?"

"Yes, I know all that!" gasped Madeline, making a great effort to master her agitation. She must protest now or never. "I know everything you would say; but I shall never marry Lord Anthony, and I would be wrong to let you think so. I like him; but, if he persists, I shall hate him. I have said 'No' once; let that be sufficient for him—and *you*!" Then, dreading the consequences of this rashly courageous speech, she got up and hurried out of the room, leaving her father in sole possession of

the rug, and actually gasping for speech, his thin lips opening and shutting like a fish's mouth—when the fish has just been landed. At last he found his voice.

“I don't care one (a big D) for Madeline and her fancies, and this thunder in the air has upset her. A woman's no means yes; and she shall marry Foster as sure as my name is Robert West.” To Lord Anthony he said, “I'd a little quiet talk with Madeline, and your name came up. She admitted that she liked you; so you just bide your time and wait. Everything comes to those who wait.”

To this Lord Tony nodded a dubious acquiescence. The poor fellow was thinking of his creditors. How would they like this motto? and how much longer would *they* wait?

“I told you she liked you,” pursued Mr. West consolingly—“she said so;

A Disagreeable Interview. 113

so you have not even to *begin* with a little aversion. She has set her face against marriage; she declared she would not marry, and what's more—and this scores for you—she gave me her word of honour that there was no one she *wished* to marry. So it's a clear course and no favour, and the best man wins. And remember, 'Tony,' said her shrewd little parent, thumping, as he spoke, that gentleman's reluctant shoulder, "that I back you, and it's a good thing to have the father and the money on your side, let me tell you."

Ten days went by very quietly—the calm after the storm. Mr. West never alluded to his daughter's foolish speech, and kissed her and patted her on the shoulder that selfsame night, as if there had been no little scene between them in the morning. He was waiting. Lord

114 Married or Single?

Anthony, even in Madeline's opinion, behaved beautifully. He did not hold himself too markedly aloof, and yet he never thrust his society upon her, or sought to have a word with her alone. He also was waiting.

CHAPTER XX.

NOT "A HAPPY COUPLE."

THE postponed picnic to the Devil's Pie-dish eventually came off. It took place on the occasion of what was called "a holiday of obligation," when no good Catholics are allowed to work, but must put on their best clothes and attend Mass. As there were no keepers or beaters available, the shooting-men meekly submitted to their fate, and started to the mountains, for once, minus dogs and guns, and escorting a large assortment of ladies, in a break, landau, dog-cart, and jaunting-car. The morning was

116 Married or Single ?

lovely ; the treacherous sun smiled upon and beguiled the party to the summit of one of the mountains—a wild spot commanding a splendid view of river, forest, lake, and sea—a long, long climb, but it repaid the exertion. Luncheon was laid out in the Pie-dish, a green hollow between two peaks, and it was there discussed with great appreciation. The festive party sat long. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, mists began to collect, clouds to gather ; the scenery at their feet grew dimmer and yet dimmer, the hypocritical sunshine vanished and gave way to rain, heavy, stinging rain. There was no shelter, not for miles—not a bush, much less a tree ; but at a distance some one descried what looked like a *mound of stones*, but proved to be a cottage. To this dwelling every one ran at their utmost speed. It certainly was a house—a little

humped-back cot that seemed as if it had been in the act of running down hill and had sat down. It consisted of a kitchen and bedroom, and the former could scarcely contain the company, even standing. There were one or two stools, a chest, and a chair. The atmosphere was stifling, but "any port in a storm;" anything sooner than the icy, cutting rain that swept the mountain. When their eyes became accustomed to the place, it turned out that besides smoke and hens, it contained an old woman, who sat huddled up by the fire enjoying a pipe, and who stared stolidly and made no answer to eager inquiries for permission to remain. She was either stone deaf or silly, possibly both. But suddenly a barefooted girl entered, with a creel of wet turf on her back.

"I see yees running, and yees are

118 Married or Single?

kindly welcome," upsetting her load in a corner, and shaking out her wet shawl. "The grannie, there," pointing, "has no English; 'tis only Irish she can spake."

"Irish! Oh, I'd like to hear it so much!" cried Miss Pamela. "Oh, do make her talk!" Exactly as if she were alluding to some mechanical toy, such as a talking-doll.

"She's not much of a talker, at all, miss—and she's cruel old; and so many quality coming in on her at once has a bit stunned her. I'm sorry we are short of sates," looking round, and proffering the turf creel to Lady Rachel. "And I've no tay, but lashins of butter-milk."

"Never mind anything, thank you," said Mr. West, pompously; "we have just lunched."

"Oh, an' is that yourself, me noble

Not "A Happy Couple." 119

gentleman, from the castle below! An' 'tis proud I am to see yees. And here's Michael for ye," as a tall dark countryman with long black whiskers entered, amazement at the invasion depicted in his dark blue eyes.

"'Tis a wet day, Michael," said Mr. West, who employed him as a beater.

"'Tis so, yer honour."

"Do you think it will last?" asked Madeline.

"I could not rightly say, miss; but I think not. It come on so sudden."

"I suppose you have been to the town to Mass?"

"Yes, sir; second Mass."

"Did you meet any friends, Micky? Did you get a drink?" inquired Lord Tony, insinuatingly.

"No, not to say a drink, sir."

"Well, what?"

120 Married or Single ?

“Just a *taste*.”

“And if you were to be treated, Mick, what would you choose? Give it a name, now,” said Lord Tony, genially.

“Oh, whisky and porter !”

“What, together ?”

“Ay. And why not? Sure, ’tis the best in many ways.”

“What makes you say that ?”

“Faix ! an’ with *raison*. If I drink porter I’m full before I’m drunk, ye see ; if I drink whisky, I’m drunk before I’m full, and both together comes about right.”

“Michael,” cried his wife, “’tis you as ought to be dead ashamed, talking in such a coarse, loose way before the ladies ! Ye has them all upset, so ye has.” And, to make a diversion, she darted into the room and returned with (by way of a treat for the ladies) a baby

Not "A Happy Couple." 121

in her arms. It had weak, blinking, blue eyes, was wrapped in an old shawl, and was apparently about a month old. However, it created quite the sensation its mother had anticipated.

"Oh, Lord," cried Mr. West, "a baby! I hate babies, though I like small children—especially little boys! Take it away before it starts screaming."

"Oh, show it to me! Let me have it!" came simultaneously from several quarters; but in each case the baby received its new friend with a yell, and had to be promptly returned to its apologetic parent. Several had tried their hand upon it; Miss Pam, Mrs. Leach, Miss Lumley, and Lady Rachel had been repulsed in turn.

"Now, Maddie, let us see what way you would manage it, or if you know which end is uppermost!" said Lady

122 Married or Single ?

Rachel, taking the child from its mother, and laying it in Madeline's arms.

After a storm a calm ! The irritable infant was actually quiet at last, and glared at his new nurse in silence ; and whilst Madeline hushed it and rocked it, and talked to it in a most approved fashion, the delighted mother and granny looked on with grateful surprise. And then the old lady made some loud remark in Irish, and pointed her pipe at Madeline.

“What does she say? Oh, do tell us?” cried Miss Pamela, excitedly.
“*Do—do*, please !”

“Oh, miss dear, I—I—faix, then I couldn't !”

“'Tis no harm whatever,” broke in Michael, with a loud laugh.

“Then out with it !” commanded Mr. West from a corner, where he was sitting

on a kist, swaying his little legs high above the ground, and fully expecting to hear some pleasant Irish compliment about his daughter doing everything well.

"She says the lady has such a wonderful knack, that she must have had great practice entirely, and 'tis a married woman she is, with a baby of her own!"

This was not the description of speech that Mr. West or any one expected. He frowned heavily, looked extremely displeased, and growled out, "I think the old hag in the corner has been having some of your brew, Michael," whilst the rest of the party set up a sudden buzz of talking, to hide the unfortunate remark of the venerable semi-savage.

Poor Miss West! No one ventured to look at her save Lord Tony. She

had bent her face over the baby, and her very forehead was crimson.

The captious weather now made a diversion; it was going to clear. People began to shake their capes and hats, to fumble for their gloves. Mrs. Leech—it was well there was no looking-glass, for every one was more or less damp and dishevelled—felt her faultless fringe was perfectly straight, her feathers in a sort of pulp, thanks to the torrents upon a Kerry mountain. The torrents had ceased entirely, the deceitful sun was shining, and once more the picnicians sallied forth, not sorry to breathe a little fresh air. Mr. West had placed half a crown in Mrs. Riordan's hand, and received in return many blessings; but his daughter had pressed a whole sovereign into the infant's tiny palm, ere she followed her father and guests over the threshold.

Not "A Happy Couple." 125

And now to get home! The short grass was damp, noisy rivulets trickled boastfully after the rain, but the mountains and low country looked like a brilliant, freshly painted scene: the hills were gay with gorse, cranberries, and bright purple heather, and dotted with sheep and little black cattle. The party now descended two and two—Lord Tony and Madeline the last. He was really in love with this pretty tall girl who walked beside him, with a deer-stalker cap on her dark hair, a golf-cape over her graceful shoulders, and a lovely colour, the result of rain and wind, in her charming face. The rain and wind had but enhanced *her* beauty. Yes; they would get on capitally; she would be not only a wife to be proud of, but a *bonne camarade*, ever gay, quick-witted, and good-tempered; a capital hostess and country gentleman's

126 Married or Single ?

helpmate. How well she got over the ground, how nimbly she scaled the stiles, and climbed the loose walls without bringing down half a ton of stones. Here was another opportunity: speak he *would*. Gradually and clumsily he brought the subject round to the topic nearest his heart. His speech was half uttered, when she interrupted him, saying—

“Lord Anthony, I like you very much as a friend——”

“You need not offer me platonic friendship, because I won’t have it, and I don’t believe in it. No,” he began impetuously. “And if you like me, I am quite content.”

“Stop! Please let me finish. I like you so much, that I am going to tell you a great secret.”

“You are engaged to be married?” he exclaimed.

"No; I am married already."

Lord Tony halted. She also came to a full stop, and they looked at one another in expressive silence.

She was wonderfully cool, whilst he was crimson with astonishment; his eyes dilated, his mouth quivered, his lower lip dropped.

"You are joking!" he gasped out at last.

"No; indeed I am not."

"And where is your husband?"

"He is in London. My father does not know that such a person exists."

"Great Cæsar's ghost!"

"No; I have never dared to tell him yet. I married from school," she continued, and in a few hurried sentences gave the outline of her story, omitting her husband's name and profession, and all reference to her small son.

"You see how I am situated. I have

not ventured to tell the truth yet, and I confide my secret to your honour and your keeping.”

“Of course it is perfectly safe,” he began, rather stiffly, “and I feel myself very much honoured by your confidence, and all that.”

“Oh, Lord Tony, please don’t talk to me in that tone,” she exclaimed, with tears in her eyes. “I told you—because—you are what men call ‘a good sort ;’ because I feel that I can rely upon you ; because, though you like me, you don’t really care for me, you know you don’t ; nor have I ever encouraged you or any man. My father is devoted to you ; he is determined to—to—well—you know his wishes—and I want you to allow him to think that you have cooled, and have changed your mind. You—you understand ?”

"And play the hypocrite all round!"

"Yes, but only for a little while."

"Rather hard lines, when I have *not* changed my mind. Is Rachel in the swindle?"

"No—oh no!—no one but you and me and my husband, and a friend of his."

"And pray, when do you intend to discharge your little domestic bomb?"

"When I go home. If I were to speak now, I should be turned out, probably on the hall door-steps, and the party would be broken up."

(Yes, and there were several good days' deer-stalking still in prospect, thought Lord Tony, much as he was concerned at this recent astounding confidence.)

"I know you are dreadfully vexed," she said humbly; "but you will forgive me and stand by me, won't you?" and she looked at him appealingly. She had

really most lovely and expressive eyes ; who could refuse them anything ?

“ Meaning, that I am to neglect you openly, slight you on all occasions ? ”

“ There is a medium ; you need not be *too* marked in your defection, unless you like ”—with a short, hysterical laugh.

“ I don’t *like* the job at all ; but I will lend you a hand, and be a party to the fraud. Whoever is your husband, Mrs. What’s-your-name, is a deuced lucky fellow ! ”

“ Then it is a bargain, that you keep my secret ? ”

“ Yes ; here is my hand on it ! ”

At this instant (it is constantly the way) Mr. West paused and looked behind, and was extremely pleased. He had intended to shout to this tardy pair to hurry on, for the carriages were waiting, the horses, of course, catching cold.

However, he must make allowances, under the circumstances.

Evidently Tony had come to the point again, and been accepted. He hastened down the road in great delight, hustled the company into various vehicles, and departed in the landau *vis-à-vis* to Mrs. Leach (the wretched condition of her hair and complexion discounted many delightful recollections of her beauty); and he took care to leave the *dog-cart* behind, for the sole use of the happy couple.

CHAPTER XXI.

AN INTERRUPTION.

It was certainly strange that Lord Tony had not sought him out the evening after the picnic, said Mr. West to himself, considering that it was all settled now. Indeed, it struck him that his future son-in-law pointedly avoided him, and had lounged out of the smoking-room when he found himself with him alone. Of course, Lord Tony was aware that his consent was granted, but he would have liked him to have come to him at once. The next day, despite an effort to escape, Mr. West captured his reluctant quarry *en route* to the stables, and said, as he

overtook him, rather out of breath, "Well, my boy, I see you made it all right yesterday! Why have you not been to tell the old man—eh?" and he beamed upon him and poked him playfully with his cane.

Lord Tony suddenly found himself in a very nice moral dilemma. Oh! here was a fix and no mistake!

"There is nothing to tell yet, Mr. West," he blurted out.

"What! when I saw you both philtering behind the party hand-in-hand, and—and—left you the dog-cart on the strength of it!"

"Oh, I only took Miss West's hand for a moment—to—to ratify a promise."

"Promise of what?" impatiently.

"A promise of her friendship," stammered his companion. It was a moment of mental reservations.

134 Married or Single?

“Oh!” with an expression of deepest scorn. “That wasn’t the way we made love when I was a young man. What a miserable milk-and-watery set you are! Friendship!”

“Yes, I know there is a falling off,” admitted Lord Tony, with humility. “But we are not as energetic in any way as the last generation. We prefer to take things easy, and to take our own time. Miss West is young—‘marry in haste and repent at leisure,’ you know,” he pursued collectedly. “You must not rush Miss West, you know. She—she—all she asks for is *time*.”

“Did she *name* any time?”

“Er—well—no.”

“I’m afraid you mismanaged the business—eh? You just leave it to me. *I’ll* arrange it!”

“No—no—no. That’s just the one

thing I bar. Interference would dish the whole concern. I beg and implore of you to leave—a—well alone—for the present, at any rate. Miss West and I understand one another.”

“I’m glad of that; for I’m blessed if I understand *either* of you!” exclaimed his disgusted listener.

“Ah! hullo, there goes Miss Pace, and I promised to play tennis with her. I must go and get my bat and shoes.”
Exit.

At the end of September the tide of enjoyment at Clane was at its height. Theatricals were in rehearsal — that fertile field for flirtation and fighting. The bags of the season had been enviably heavy; the poor neighbours were sensible of a pleasant circulation of money and new ideas; prices were rising steadily. The wealthy neighbours appreciated Mr.

136 Married or Single ?

West's princely hospitality, and spoke of him as "not a bad sort in his way, though a shocking little bounder." Mrs. Leach had prolonged her visit, and her attentions to her host were becoming quite remarkable. He was not an ardent sportsman ; his short legs were unaccustomed to striding over the heather-clad mountains ; he did not want to shoot deer—in fact, he was rather afraid of them. So he left the delights of his shooting to well-contented, keen young men, and was easily beguiled into long saunters among the grounds and woods in the syren's company. To tell the truth, they were not much missed, and they frequently rested on rustic seats, and talked to one another with apparent confidence—flattering confidence. He spoke of Madeline's future—his earnest desire to see her suitably married. "A girl like her

might marry a duke ; don't you think so, Mrs. Leach ? ”

“ She might,” said the lady, but without a trace of enthusiasm in her voice—in fact, there was an inflection of doubt. “ She is undeniably lovely, but—— ”

“ But what ? ”

“ I—well—I am sentimental ” (about as sentimental as a charwoman), “ and I have my own ideas. I think that dear Madeline has a private romance : that she either cares for some one whom she can never marry—— ”

“ That's nonsense,” interrupted her companion, impatiently. “ I have her word of honour that there is no one she wants to marry.”

“ Oh, well, she may have loved and *lost*,” said the lady, sweetly ; “ for, speaking as a woman, it is inconceivable that a girl who is, or was, heart-free could be

138 Married or Single?

absolutely indifferent to *every one*. She has dozens of admirers, for she is not only very pretty, but"—and she smiled enchantingly into Mr. West's little eyes—"very rich—your heiress. It is my opinion that Madeline has some little closet in her heart that you have never seen—that she is constant to some memory. Of course, time tries all things, and in time this memory will fade; but I am positive that dearest Madeline will not marry for some years." Then she tapped his arm playfully. They were sitting side-by-side in a shady path in the vast pleasure grounds. "You will be married before her *yourself*."

"I—I—marry! I have never dreamt of such a thing."

"Why not, pray? You are comparatively young. A man is always young, until he is really going downhill. A man

is young at fifty. Now, look at a woman at fifty!" and she paused expressively.

He turned his eyes upon her. Little did he suppose that he was contemplating a woman of fifty—a woman who was extravagant, luxurious, dreadfully in debt, almost at the end of her resources and her friends' forbearance, and who was resolved upon marrying him whom she had once called "that vulgar horror, the little Australian squatter."

He looked at her with a rather shame-faced air and a grin. Alas! flattery was hurrying him to destruction. She was an extremely handsome woman, of the Juno type—erect, stately, with bright, dark eyes, dark hair, a short straight nose, and beautiful teeth (some were her own). She was dressed in a pale yellow muslin, with white ribbons, and wore a most fascinating picture-hat

140 Married or Single ?

and veil ; her gloves, shoes, and sunshade were of the choicest, and it was not improbable that, in the coming by-and-by, Mr. West would have the pleasure of paying for this charming toilette.

“ A woman of fifty,” she pursued, “ is an old hag ; her day has gone by, her hour of retreat has sounded. She is grey, stout—ten to one, unwieldy—and dowdy. Now, a *man* of fifty shoots, hunts, dances as he did when he was twenty-five—in fact, as far as dancing goes, he is thrice as keen as the ordinary ball-room boy, who simply won’t dance, and is the despair of hostesses ! ”

“ I’ve never thought of marrying,” he repeated. “ Never ! ”

“ No ; all your thoughts are for Madeline, I am aware, and the alliance she is to make ; but my motto is, ‘ Live while you live ; live your own individual life,

and don't starve on the scraps of other people's good things.' ”

“Do you think any one would have me, Mrs. Leach ? ” he asked, as he leant on his elbow and looked up into her glorious eyes.

She was the Honourable Mrs. Leach, well-connected, fashionable, handsome, and—oh, climax!—“smart.” Yes, the idea was an illumination. How well she would look at the head of his table and in the landau !

“Dear Mr. West, how humble you are ! I am sure you would—(she meant his money) —make any reasonable woman happy.” She glanced at him timidly, and looked down and played coyly with her *châtelaine*.

What eyelashes she had, what a small white ear, what a pretty hand ! His own was already gently laid upon it, the words

were actually on his lips, when a bare-headed page burst through an adjacent path, breathless from running. He had a telegram in his hand, and halted the moment he caught sight of his master, who instantly withdrew his hand and became the alert man of business.

Mrs. Leach was a lady, so she was unable to breathe an oath into her moustache, —had oaths been her safety-valve. She, however, thought some hasty thoughts of round-faced pages who brought telegrams (which she kept to herself). Mr. West, however, was not so self-possessed. As soon as he cast his eyes over the telegram he gave vent to a loud exclamation of impatience, and then subsided into an inarticulate mutter, whilst the page and the lady devoured him with their eyes !

“Bad news, I’m afraid,” she said sympathetically.

“Um—ah, yes. My stockbroker in London has made a most confounded mess of some business. Buys in when I tell him to sell out. I wish I had him by the ear this minute.”

“Is there an answer, sir?” asked the page.

“Yes; I’m coming in directly. Tell the fellow to wait.” And Mr. West and the handsome widow turned towards the house.

This vile telegram had entirely distracted his ideas. His mind was now fastened on the Stock Exchange, on the money market; he had not a thought to spare for the lady beside him.

“It’s the twenty-ninth, is it not?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“I must go home sooner than I intended. I shall have to be in London

144 Married or Single ?

next week. The fox is his own best messenger" (and the fox was going to escape!).

Mrs. Leach had intended remaining in her present comfortable quarters for another fortnight. This odious telegram had upset her plans.

"Then, you will not return here?"

"Oh no. What would be the good of that?"

"It seems a pity. You will be losing all the lovely autumn tints. October is a charming month."

"Yes; but it is not charming when some one at a distance is making ducks and drakes of your coin, and I'd rather see the colour of my own money again than any autumn tint," was the practical remark.

"I have had a most delightful visit here. I shall never, never forget dear

Clane, nor all your kindness and hospitality."

"You must come to us in London."

"Thank you so much, and I shall always be delighted to chaperon dear Maddie at any time. A girl like her is in such a difficult position. She is very young, you know, to go out without a married lady. Of course, you are a host in yourself; but——"

"But Lady Rachel and Mrs. Lorraine take Maddie out, you know," broke in Mr. West, "and a girl can go anywhere with her father."

"Now there, dear Mr. West, I differ with you totally—indeed I do. A girl should have an older woman as well—a woman for choice who has no young people of her own, who is well-connected, well-looking, well-dressed, and who knows the ropes, as they say." She was

146 Married or Single ?

sketching a portrait of herself. "And Madeline is so remarkably pretty, too, the observed of all observers. I am so fond of her. She *is* so sweet. I almost feel as if she were my own daughter. Ah! I never had a daughter!" (But she could have a step-daughter; and if she was once established as Madeline's friend and chaperon, the rest would be an easy matter.)

"I am very sorry to have to leave Clane sooner than I expected; but business is business. Business first, pleasure afterwards."

"And you have given us all a great deal of pleasure. I don't know such a host anywhere; and it has been such a comfort to me to talk to you about my hateful law business, and to tell you things unreservedly, and consult you. My odious brother-in-law, Lord Suckington,

never will assist me, and I never seem to be out of the hands of my solicitors. Ah, here is your horrid telegraph-boy waiting. May I go in and order tea, and pour you out a cup? ”

* * * * *

In ten days' time the entire party had dispersed. Madeline and her father travelled over to London. As the latter took leave of Mrs. Leech at Mallow Junction, and saw her into the Cork train, that warm-hearted lady, looking bewitching in a charming travelling-cloak and hat, leant out of the window and whispered as she pressed his hand, “ Good-bye, or, rather, *au revoir*. Be *sure* you write to me ! ”

And was it possible that he had seen a tear in her eye ?

CHAPTER XXII.

MR. WYNNE'S VISITOR.

AND meanwhile what of Laurence Wynne? His short, smart sketches had made a hit. He was becoming a man of mark in literary as well as legal circles, and was overwhelmed with invitations to dinners, luncheons, and "at homes;" for be it known that Laurence Wynne was looked upon with favourable eyes by not a few mammas and daughters as a clever, rising, good-looking young bachelor. Some had heard a vague rumour that there once upon a time had been a Mrs. Wynne, a girl whom he had married out

of a lodging-house or restaurant, but who, fortunately for him, had died in the first year of her marriage. Some said this was not true, some said it was. All agreed with extraordinary unanimity in never alluding to Mrs. Wynne in his company. After all, in these days of feverish haste, a story is soon forgotten, and people have too much to do to waste time in turning over the back pages of other folks' lives. The ladies had not been slow in picking up sundry hints and allusions to "Wynne," as dropped across dinner tables by their husbands and fathers, and not a few hospitable families had made up their minds that they would cultivate Mr. Wynne.

In vain they were assured that he was not a society man and hated ladies—which, of course, was nonsense. He was busy and industrious, that was all;

150 Married or Single?

and now and then he did come out of his shell, and sit at their tables, and stand against the wall at their dances, and made himself so agreeable that he was figuratively patted on the back, and requested to come again; but he so seldom came again.

It was part of his duty, he told himself, to be on good terms with his august seniors—to respond to their first invitations, to make himself pleasant to their wives and daughters, hand tea-cups, turn over music, open doors, talk suitable commonplaces; but when any of these same young ladies sat down, so to speak, before him, and commenced to open the trenches for a flirtation, he began to feel uncomfortable. Long ago, before he met Madeline West, this sort of thing was well enough—but even then a little of it had gone a long way.

Now, with Madeline in the background, and amusing herself, no doubt very delightfully, and not thinking of him, he could not—no, he could not—like others less conscientious, laugh and exchange sallies and cross swords and glances with any of these pretty, sprightly girls, knowing full well in his heart that he was all the time that wolf in sheep's clothing—a *married man*! And then he was critical at heart, and hard to please.

As he looked round the various groups at picnics and tennis parties—he now and then went for an hour—he saw no one who approached Madeline in any way—face, figure, grace, or gait—especially Madeline as he had last seen her—in her very fine feathers. Doubtless any of these girls would have made a more manageable wife, he thought to himself

bitterly. Yes! she had now taken the bit completely within her teeth, and he was powerless to control her. She went and came and stayed away when she pleased, and for precisely as long as it suited her. Her desertion—it was that—was all in pursuit of his interests—his and the child's. What a fool she must think him! She had evidently resolved to play the *rôle* of daughter first, wife next, and mother very much the last of all! Her neglect of him he could tolerate, but her neglect of her child made him excessively angry. She had wholly consigned it to Mrs. Holt, and lightly shaken off all a mother's duties. She a mother! She did not look the part as she chattered fashionable gossip to those idiotic young men on Euston platform, and never cast a thought to the infant she was turning her back on in a certain country

farmhouse. She had been away nearly four months, and she had written—oh yes, pretty frequently, but the tone of her letters was a little forced, their gaiety was not natural—perhaps the tone of his own epistles was somewhat curt. The relations between Mr. and Mrs. Wynne were becoming strained—a crisis was impending.

* * * * *

Among the departures from Kingstown on a certain date were Mr. and Miss West and suite, who duly arrived at Belgrave Square, and found London filling fast. Their arrival, however, was somewhat unexpected—the housekeeper had barely time to despatch her sister's family back to Manchester, and the poor woman was compelled to put off an evening party for which she had issued invitations among her own set.

154 Married or Single ?

Mr. West had a great deal of business to transact, and spent most of his days in the city—and this was Madeline's opportunity.

She lost no time in paying a visit to the Inner Temple, arriving on foot, plainly dressed, and wearing a thick veil. She was a good deal bewildered by the old courts and passages, but at last discovered Mr. Wynne's chambers. Here she was received by an elderly, bare-armed, irascible-looking woman—with a palpable beard—who, after looking her over leisurely from head to foot, told her to "Go up to the second flight front. She could tell nothing of Mr. Wynne ; he was in and out all day, like a dog in a fair."

Further up the narrow stairs she came face-to-face with two gentlemen, who paused—she felt it—and looked back at

her as she knocked and rang at the door of "Mr. Laurence Wynne." Truly, such an elegant-looking young lady was not to be met about the old Temple every day; and never had such an apparition been seen on Mr. Wynne's landing. The outer room was occupied by two clerks, who stared at the visitor in unqualified amazement. Here was something spicy in the shape of a client! Very, very different to the usual run. "A breach of promise," was their immediate and mutual idea. Something more to the purpose than cranky old fogies fighting about rights of way, or an involved legacy case. This was a pretty girl, and a swell.

So much they noted with their sharp, semi-judicial eyes, as she stood timidly in the doorway and raised her veil.

156 Married or Single ?

One of them instantly bounded off his seat, and asked what he could do for her ?

“ Could she see Mr. Wynne ? ” she faltered, as her eyes roved round the outer office, with its great double desk piled with documents, its rows of law books ranged round the room on staggering, rickety shelves, its threadbare carpet, its rusty fender, its grimy windows, and last, not least, two bottles of stout, and a pewter mug.

Still, these two youths might be Laurence’s clerks. Could it be possible ? Could it be possible that these immense piles of papers concerned Laurence ? If so, he was getting on—really getting on at last. But what a horrible musty place ! The very air smelt of dust and leather and law books.

“ Mr. Wynne, miss, did you say ? Very

sorry, but Mr. Wynne is in court," said the clerk, briskly.

"When will he be back?" she inquired, advancing and standing in the front of another door, evidently Mr. Wynne's own sanctum.

"Afraid I cannot say, miss; he is to speak in the case of *Fuller v. Potts*—breach of contract. Any business, any message——"

But the words died upon his lips—this uncommonly cool young party had actually walked into Mr. Wynne's own sitting-room.

"It's all right," she remarked carelessly, divining his horror. "Mr. Wynne knows me."

And she went and sat down in his armchair, in front of a table piled with documents, all more or less neatly tied up and docketed.

158 Married or Single ?

There were numbers of letters under little weights. There was a law book, a couple of open notes, and all the apparatus of a busy legal man. She shrugged her shoulders and looked round the room ; it was dingy and shabby (furniture taken at a valuation from the last tenant) ; the carpet between the door and the fireplace was worn threadbare, as if it were a pathway—which it was.

Another pathway ran from the window to the wall, which the inmate had probably paced as he made up his speeches. There was her especial abomination, horse-hair furniture, a queer spindle-legged sideboard, some casual old prints on the wall ; certainly there was nothing in the room to divert Laurence's attention. Outside there was no prospect beyond a similar set of chambers, a very ugly block of buildings, and one forlorn

tree waving its branches restlessly to and fro.

She got up and glanced into an adjoining apartment. The clerks were not now watching her — Mr. Wynne did not tolerate idleness. This was his bedroom, a still barer scene. No carpet whatever, no curtains, a small iron bedstead, a big bath, a battalion of boots. Laurence, she remembered, was always extremely particular about his boots, and *hated* to wear them when patched; these were whole, well cut, and in good case. There was a sixpenny glass on the wall, a painted chest of drawers and washstand, also one chair. Spartan simplicity, indeed! What a horrible contrast to her own luxurious home! She closed the door with a little shudder, and as she did so a quantity of large, important-looking cards and envelopes, stuck about the

160 Married or Single ?

dusty chimney-piece mirror and the pipe-rack, caught her eye, and she immediately proceeded to examine them with dainty fingers.

“Blest if she ain’t overhauling his invitations !” exclaimed one of the clerks, who, by tilting his chair back until it was at a most hazardous angle, caught a glimpse of what he and his coadjutor began to think was “Mr. Wynne’s young woman.”

“Her cheek beats all ! Shall I go and interfere ? ” asked the first speaker, in an awestruck whisper.

“No ; you just leave her alone,” said number two, who had the bump of caution well developed. “It ain’t our business ; but I *did* think he was about the last man in the world to have a lady coming and routing among his things. There ain’t nothing that she’ll find as will

make her any wiser," he concluded contemptuously.

But here he was mistaken! She discovered a great deal that surprised her much—very much. Here were cards from old judges and stupid law fogies, requesting the pleasure of Mr. Wynne's company at dinner. That was easily understood. But there were several invitations to entertainments to which she and her father had been bidden! and also, what was the strangest thing of all, blazoned cards of invitation to houses to which her father had not been able to obtain an *entrée*, smile he never so assiduously on the smart or noble hosts. She stood for several minutes with one of these precious cards in her hand, and turned it over reflectively as she recalled the desperate and unavailing efforts of her parent to obtain

a similar honour—the toadying, the flattery, the back-stair crawling that it made her crimson to recall ! And, such is poor human nature—poor, frail human nature !—this bit of pasteboard did more to raise her husband in her estimation than all the briefs she saw piled upon his desk. She now began to contemplate him from a new point of view. Hitherto she had been very fond of Laurence—in a way—her own way. He had been good to her when she had no friends, he had borne their poverty with wonderful patience. Yes, certainly he had. But she had thought—rather resentfully at times—that a man without some preparation for such a rainy day as they had experienced ought not to have married ; he should have left her as he found her. She did not hold these views at the time. She liked Laurence better than any one,

all the same; but the horrible intimacy of dire want had bred — well, yes, a little contempt; his illness, his helplessness had made her put herself somewhat above him in her own secret thoughts. She (for a time) had been bread-winner and house-band, and well and bravely she had struggled at that desperate crisis; but, alas! that it must be recorded, riches had spoiled her. She had inherited a luxurious, pleasure-loving nature, which cultivation had fostered, until, from a small and scarcely noticeable plant, it had grown into an overwhelming jungle! The longer she lived in her father's home the less disposed was she to return to her own modest roof-tree; and especially, looking round with a wry face, to such a place as this! She was now necessary to her father. He was something (he said) of an invalid;

164 Married or Single ?

whilst Laurence was young and strong. Every day she was hoping to see her way to making the great disclosure, and every day the chance of making that disclosure seemed to become more and more remote. Laurence was evidently well thought of in influential circles, and, "of course, Laurence is of good family. Any one can see that at a glance," she mentally remarked; "and, no doubt, his own people had now taken him by the hand."

The discovery that he moved in a set above her own had raised him in her opinion. Latterly she had been looking down on Laurence, as already stated—perhaps only an inch or so, but still, she placed herself above him. He had drawn a great and unexpected prize in the matrimonial lottery, but he scarcely seemed to realize the value of his treasure !

She had bracketed Laurence mentally with obscurity, shabbiness, and poverty, and had a vague idea that only through her means could he ever emerge into the sunshine of prosperity. She had a kind of protecting affection for him, dating from the days when she had starved for his sake, and made his bed and his beef tea, and washed his shirts. She looked down upon him just a little. It is possible to be fond of a man and to entertain this feeling. And now Laurence's busy clerks, and these coroneted envelopes had given her ideas a *shock*. She went over and stood in the window, and drummed idly upon the small old-fashioned panes, where not a few names and initials were cut. As she stood thus—certainly a very pretty figure to be seen in any one's window, much less that of an avowed anchorite

166 Married or Single ?

like Laurence Wynne—a young gentleman sauntered to the opposite casement, with his hands in his pockets and his mouth widely yawning, as if he were on the point of swallowing up the whole premises. He paused in mute astonishment, and gazed incredulously across the narrow lane that divided the two buildings. Then Madeline distinctly heard him shout in a stentorian voice—

“I say, Wallace, come here, quick—quick, and look at the girl in Wynne’s window! My wig, ain’t that a joke?”

On hearing this summons she instantly backed out of sight, and had the amusement of seeing three heads peering across, vainly endeavouring to catch a glimpse of the promised apparition. However, they saw her depart—although she was not aware of the fact—and they were highly pleased with her figure, her walk,

and her feet, and took care to tell Mr. Wynne of their gratifying and flattering opinion, and to poke him in the ribs with a walking-stick—not as agreeable or facetious an action as it sounds—and to assure him that “he was a sly old bird, and that still waters run deep, and that they had no idea he had such good taste;” all of which witticisms Mr. Wynne took in anything but good part, especially as he could not tell them that the lady upon whom they passed such enthusiastic encomiums was his wife. Indeed, if he had done so they would only have roared with laughter, and flatly refused to believe him.

Madeline waited three-quarters of an hour, and then made up her mind to return home. As she walked through the outer office, once more thickly veiled, the alert clerk sprang forward to open the

168 Married or Single ?

door. As he held it back, with an inky hand, he said, with a benevolent grin—

“When Mr. Wynne comes back, who shall I say called, miss ? ”

Madeline hesitated for a moment, and then, turning to the youth in her most stately manner, said—“Say Miss West,” and having thus left her name, with all due dignity she passed through the door with a slight inclination of her head and walked downstairs.

She met a good many cheery-looking young barristers, in wigs and flyaway gowns, as she passed through the precincts of the inns, and wondered if she would come across Laurence, and if she would recognize him in that funny dress. For, of course, he wore a wig and gown too ; but he had always kept them in his chambers, and she had never seen them. But she did not meet Laurence—so she

took a hansom, did a little shopping in Bond Street, and then got home just in nice time for afternoon tea.

As she sat sipping it in her luxurious tea-jacket, and with her feet on the fender-stool, Mr. Wynne returned home, tired, hoarse, and cold. His fire was out. And, moreover, there was no sign of his modest evening meal.

"Confound that old hag downstairs!" he muttered.

"Please, sir," said one of the clerks who had been busy locking up, and who now followed him into his sanctum, "there was a party to see you while you were out—a party as waited for a good bit of an hour."

"Well, well, couldn't you have dealt with him?" impatiently. "What did he want?"

"It was a lady," impressively.

170 Married or Single ?

“A lady!” he echoed. “Oh yes, I know, old Mrs. Redhead—about that appeal——”

“No, it was not; it was a young lady.”

“Oh, a young lady?” he repeated.

“Yes, and she bid me be sure to tell you,” embroidering a little to give colour to his story, “as she was very sorry not to see you, and to say that Miss West had called.”

“Miss West? Are you sure she said West?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll take an oath to it, if you like.”

“All right, then. Yes, yes, it’s all right. You can go,” dismissing him with a wave of his arm, and, suddenly pitching his wig in one direction and his gown in another, he sat down to digest the news.

So Madeline had come to beard him in his den. What did it all mean? and did she intend to return?

For fully an hour he sat in the dusk—nay, the darkness—pondering this question, forgetful of fire, light, and food. He would have liked to have cross-examined his clerk as to where she sat, and what she said; but no, he could not stoop to that; and then his mind reverted again to that crucial and as yet unanswered question—“Did she intend to come back?”

CHAPTER XXIII.

A BOLD STEP.

MR. WEST announced that he was obliged to run down to Brighton on business and would not return until late that night, and he commanded his daughter to write and ask Lady Rachel to come and lunch, and spend the day. At lunch time Lady Rachel duly drove up, and rustled in, full of gossip, full of vitality, and dressed out in the last suggestion of the winter's fashion. She had a great deal to tell about a grand dinner at a great house the previous evening, and retailed volubly and at length—the *menu*, the names of

the guests—twenty-six—and the dresses of the ladies.

“I wore a new frock, rather a daring style, geranium-red, silk skirt and sleeves, and a white satin body, veiled in black net, and embroidered in steel sequins. But it really *was* sweet—one of Doucet’s. I dare not think of the price. However, it suited me—so my cavalier assured me.”

“You asked him?”

“I don’t think I did. He was a barrister. Barristers are looking up! Yes, another chicken cutlet, please,” holding out her plate—the Jeameses were banished. “And such a good-looking young man—a Mr. Wynne. My dear, you are giving me oyster sauce!” she screamed. “What *are* you thinking about? And, oh—where was I—what was I saying? Yes, about Wynne. He was so amusing, and said such witty things.

174 Married or Single ?

I wish I could remember half—nay, any one of them—and pass them off as my own. It was more the way he said them, though. And Madeline, my love,” laying down her knife and fork, as if suddenly overwhelmed by the recollection, “he had the most irresistible dark eyes I ever looked into !”

“Ever looked into?” repeated Madeline. “You—you seem quite impressed,” breaking up her bread rather viciously.

She—no, well she did not like it ! How dared any woman talk of her husband’s irresistible dark eyes ? And Laurence, had he been flirting ? Could he flirt ? Lady Rachel was an irreclaimable coquette.

“He is coming to dine with us next Sunday week. I wish you could come too, and see my new lion. They say he is awfully clever. Writes such smart

articles, and scarifies us poor women. The emancipated female is his particular horror."

"Indeed! How very pleasant!"

"But men like him, which is always a good sign. They say he is going into Parliament some day."

"If you are going to make a lion of every one who is said to be going into the House of Commons, you will be able to stock every menagerie in Europe," retorted Madeline, dusting crumbs off her lap.

"Or that I shall discover a good many asses under lions' skins, eh? I mentioned you, *ma belle*, and asked if he had ever heard of you, and he said yes. See what it is to be a social celebrity! And I told him that you were the prettiest girl and greatest heiress in London—and that he really *ought* to know you."

176 Married or Single ?

“ And—and what did he say ? ” turning a salt-cellar round and round.

“ Oh, I’m not quite sure what he said beyond that he was a busy man, and—oh yes, that he detested the genus heiress.”

And then the vivacious matron led the conversation away to another topic, and Madeline led the way to her boudoir. Presently Lady Rachel announced that she had an engagement at four o’clock, and that she could not remain for tea—not even if Madeline went on her knees to her, a feat that Maddie had no desire to perform—and finally she rushed off in a sort of mild whirlwind of good-byes, kisses, and last messages—screamed from the hall and stairs.

Then Madeline sat alone over the fire, and reflected on what she had heard with keen discomfort, whilst she stupidly watched the red coals. Laurence had not

answered her last two letters—he had not taken any notice of her call. Of course, he could not come to the house; but at least he might have written. He had no right to treat her as if she was a naughty child. He was entirely relieved of the burthen of her support; he could start well and unweighted in the race. She would pay for Harry too. Her father was impossible at present; he was dreadfully worried about money matters—he was ill. She was doing her best for Laurence and Harry. Surely, he knew that, and that she would rather be with them than here. But as she glanced at her magnificent surroundings, and at her silver tea equipage, just brought in by two powdered servants, with a request to know “if there were any orders for the carriage?” her heart misgave her.

Would not Laurence think that she

178 Married or Single ?

preferred all this—that this wealth was her attraction, luxury her idol—an idol that had cast out him and poor little Harry ?

She made a sudden decision. She would go and see Laurence. Yes, that very evening partake of his frugal dinner—a chop, no doubt—and coax him into a better frame of mind, and a better humour with herself. She would wear her usual evening toilette, and give him an agreeable surprise. The idea pleased her. She swallowed down her tea, ran quickly up to her room, and rang for Josephine.

“Josephine,” she said, as that very smart person appeared, “I am going out to dine with a friend—an old friend that I knew when I was at school. I want to look my very best, though it will not be a party, only one or two.

What shall I wear?" beginning to pull off her velvet morning-gown.

"Well, miss, for two or three—a quiet dinner, but smart no doubt—your primrose satin with the chiffon body, just lighted with a few brilliants. I'll do your hair in the new knot, and run the diamond arrow through it."

This simple toilet occupied a considerable time. What with dressing Madeline's hair, lacing her gown, arranging her ornaments, it was nearly seven before the great business was completed; but it was finished at last, to Josephine's entire satisfaction.

"Well, mademoiselle, I never saw you look better—no, nor as well!"

Madeline could not refrain from a smile as she glanced at her reflection in the mirror; but her present sweet complacency was but momentary. There

180 Married or Single ?

was a bitter drop in the cup. Was it for this, asked Madeline—this costly dress, those diamonds, and such-like delights—that she sacrificed her home ?

“No !” she retorted angrily, aloud, and much to Josephine’s astonishment. “No, it is *not*.”

Yet even so she was but half convinced. She was presently enveloped in a long crimson velvet mantle reaching to the ground, and trimmed with furs that were as much an outward and visible sign of Mr. West’s wealth as his house and carriage—Russian sables. Then she tied a scarf over her head, took up her fan and gloves, and, in spite of Josephine’s almost impassioned appeals to take a footman and go in the brougham, set out in a hansom alone. She herself gave the reply through the trap, in answer to the “Where to, miss ?”

And the attendant footman could not catch the address.

There was a flavour of wild adventure about the whole expedition that made her heart beat unusually fast. The idea of taking Laurence by storm in his musty chambers, of cajoling him into a more amenable frame of mind, of dining with him *tête-à-tête*, of trying the effect of her much-augmented charms upon her own husband—for she had now fully learnt to know the value of youth, beauty, and dress—all carried her away out of her usual somewhat languorous frame of mind.

She felt a little nervous as she stepped out of the hansom in the vicinity of the gloomy old Temple, and proceeded to Laurence's chambers, as before, on foot.

Fortunately the pavement was dry,

182 Married or Single ?

and her dainty shoes were none the worse.

She came to the door, and rang a pretty loud peal *this* time, smiling to herself as she thought of Laurence sitting over his solitary meal, probably by the light of an equally solitary candle.

The door was opened by a curious jerk, and by some invisible agency, and she beheld before her, half way up the stairs, the bearded beldame, carrying a heavy tray, who, unable to turn her head, shouted out querulously—"If that's the washing, come in. I hope to gracious you've done his shirts a bit better nor last week. They *were* a sight; and his collars! deary, deary me!"

And thus ejaculating, she rounded the staircase, and was lost to view; but still she shouted, though her voice did *not* come like a falling star.

“ You can go in by the other door, and lay them in his bedroom, and leave the basket.”

Madeline was half suffocated with suppressed laughter as she tripped quickly up after this authoritative old person, and as she went she removed her head gear, and when she came to the top landing, she rapidly divested herself of her long cloak.

The old woman was already in the outer office, which was lit, and had deposited her load upon a table when, hearing a rustle and a footfall, she turned and beheld Madeline—in other words, a tall, lovely young lady, wearing a yellow evening dress, with diamond buttons, diamonds in her hair, and carrying a huge painted fan in her exquisitely gloved hands. No pen could convey any idea of her amazement,

184 Married or Single?

no brush seize the expression of her countenance, as she staggered back against the nearest desk, with limp arms, protruding eyes, and open mouth, which presently uttered, in a loud and startled key, the one word “Laws!”

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN UNEXPECTED HONOUR.

A DAPPER man-servant (hired) next came upon the scene, and his astonishment was no less profound, though more skilfully concealed. He looked politely at Madeline, and said in his most proper and parrot-like tone of voice, "Who shall I say, ma'am?"

"Say," returned the young lady, giving her fringe a little pat, her chiffon frill a little twitch, and smiling slightly all the time, "say Miss West."

"Miss West!" bawled the waiter, flinging the door open with a violence

186 Married or Single ?

that nearly tore it from its ancient hinges, and then stood back, eager to witness the effect of his announcement on the company.

Madeline was scarcely less surprised than they were. She beheld a round table, decorated with flowers, wax candles, and coloured shades—really, a most civilized-looking little table—the room well lit up, its shabbiness concealed by the tender rose-coloured light, looking quite venerable and respectable, and, seated at table, Laurence and two other men—one of whom she knew! Horror! This was a great deal more than she had bargained for. She had never dreamt of dropping in thus upon a cosy little bachelor party!

And who shall paint their amazement? They were talking away, just between the soup and fish, and Wynne had been

An Unexpected Honour. 187

regretting the absence through illness of Mr. Jessop, whose vacant place awaited him. There had been a little professional discussion, an allusion to a big race, a society scandal, a commendation of some excellent dry sherry, and they were all most genial and comfortable, when the door was flung wide open, and "Miss West" was announced in a stentorian voice.

And who the deuce was Miss West? thought the two guests. All looked up and beheld a lady—a young lady—in full evening dress, and literally blazing with diamonds, standing rather doubtfully just within the doorway. Laurence Wynne felt as if he was turned to stone.

"*Madeline!*" he ejaculated under his breath. Madeline, looking like a fairy princess—but surely Madeline gone mad?

188 Married or Single ?

What could he say—what could he do ? He might cut the Gordian knot by explaining, “ Gentlemen, this beautiful girl, who has dropped, as it were, from the skies, is Mrs. Wynne—my wife ”—if she had not heralded her entrance by her maiden name. He might have done this, but now, as matters stood, his lips were sealed. He must take some step immediately. His friends and the waiter were staring at him expectantly. They evidently thought that there had been a mistake.

“ Miss West ! ” he said, suddenly pushing back his chair and rising. “ This is, indeed, an unexpected honour. What can I do for you ? There is nothing wrong at—at home, I hope ? ” now approaching her, and shaking hands.

“ No, no, ” trying to speak calmly, and casting wildly about for some plausible

An Unexpected Honour. 189

excuse. "I thought I should have found you alone." Then, colouring violently, "I—I mean disengaged, and I wished to consult you on some—some family business."

"If you will honour me by taking a seat at table, and partaking of our—er—bachelor fare, Miss West, I shall be entirely at your service afterwards," he said, conducting her to a vacant place opposite his own. "May I introduce my friend Mr. Treherne"—(Mr. Treherne had seen her on the stairs, and hugged himself as he noted the fact)—"and Mr. Fitzherbert?"

"I think Miss West and I have met before," said Mr. Fitzherbert, smiling and bowing as he rose simultaneously with Mr. Treherne, and then subsided into his chair. This was nuts. The beautiful Miss West coming quite on

the sly to Wynne's chambers—and Wynne such a staid and proper Johnnie too!—and finding, to her horror, company! It was altogether most peculiar.

However, Mr. Fitzherbert had his wits about him, and was full of society small-talk and presence of mind, and soon he and the lady were conversing vivaciously of mutual friends, and the awkward edge of this extraordinary incident had been blunted.

Soup was brought back for Miss West. The waiter waited as a waiter should wait. The dinner was well chosen and excellent (supplied from a neighbouring restaurant).

Meanwhile the good laundress watched the whole proceedings with her eye glued to a crack in the door, and suffered no look or gesture to escape her. She owed this to the whole of her acquaintance, for

An Unexpected Honour. 191

surely such a sight as she enjoyed was rarely seen. Three young bachelors, in evening dress, sitting by themselves so nice and proper, and then a grand young lady, in a beautiful dress and jewels, walking in unasked, and taking a place among them! What could it mean? It was surely not the thing for a lady—and she looked that—to be coming alone, and on foot, to chambers in the Temple, and especially to see Mr. Wynne, of all the quiet, reasonable-like men, who never looked at a woman! Oh, it beat all, that it did! And how grave he seemed, though he was talking away pleasant enough.

Thus we leave her, with her eye to the door, thoroughly enjoying herself for once in her life.

It was more than could be said for Laurence Wynne. Never had he felt so

192 Married or Single?

uncomfortable. What would Fitzherbert and Treherne think of Miss West? If the story got round the clubs, Madeline's reputation was at the mercy of every old woman—ay, and old man—in London. What on earth did she mean by descending on him at this hour, and dressed as if she was going to the opera?

He stole a glance across the candle-shades. She was conversing quite at her ease with Mr. Treherne, who was looking all the admiration he no doubt felt—and no doubt Madeline was beautiful.

What a complexion, what eyes, what clean-cut features, what a radiant, vivacious expression—and all set off by youth, a good milliner, and diamonds.

“Who would dream,” he said, as he slowly withdrew his gaze, “that she was the same Madeline who, two years previously, had been Miss Selina's slave,

and had attracted his notice and commiseration in her darned and shabby black gown? or that she was the same Madeline who had pawned the very dress off her back not twelve months ago? She could not be the same.” He looked at her again. The idea of such a thing was grotesque nonsense. She, this brilliant being who had suddenly presented herself at his humble entertainment, had surely never been his hard-working, poverty-stricken, struggling wife. If she *had*, he could not realize the fact. This magnificent-looking young lady was a stranger to him. This was a woman—or girl—of the world.

There she sat, this charming, unchaperoned young person, dining with three bachelors in the Temple with as much *sangfroid* as if it were a most conventional and everyday occurrence.

194 Married or Single?

The truth was that, the first shock recovered, the fair guest was actually enjoying herself extremely. She was extraordinarily adaptable. For one thing, she liked the *risqué*, unusual situation—her two amusing, clever, mystified supporters on either hand, who were doing their utmost to take it all as a matter of course, and to be unusually agreeable and entertaining. And she liked looking across the table at her husband's handsome, gloomy face, and remarked to herself that this was positively their first dinner-party, and that it should not be her fault if it did not go off well!

Laurence's silence and gravity implied that it was all very wrong; but it was, nevertheless, delightful. She felt quite carried out of herself with excitement and high spirits, and more than once the idea flashed across her mind—

An Unexpected Honour. 195

“ Shall I tell—shall I tell? Oh, it would be worth anything to see their faces when they hear that I am Mrs. Wynne ! ”

But Mrs. Wynne was not very good at telling, as we know, and, without any exhausting effort of self-restraint, she was enabled to hold her peace.

CHAPTER XXV.

PLAIN SPEAKING.

ALL went merry as a marriage bell. The dinner was a success. There was no hitch ; the laundress (with interludes devoted to the crack in the door) safely brought up course after course. Now they had ceased, and the company were discussing dessert, and many of the topics of last season—Henley, Ascot, Mrs. Pat Campbell, the rival charms of Hurlingham and Ranelagh.

“ Wynne here never goes to these frivolous places,” said Treherne.

“ I’m not a member, you see.”

“ ‘Can’t afford it,’ that’s his cry to all these delights. He can afford it well—a single man, no claims on his purse, and getting such fees.”

“Fees, indeed! How long have I been getting a fee at all?” he asked good-humouredly.

“There’s Milton, who has not half your screw—keeps his hunters.”

“Ah, but he has a private income. I’m a poor man.”

“You old miser! You don’t even know the meaning of the word ‘poverty.’ How do you define it?”

“In the words of the plebeian philosopher, ‘It ain’t no crime—only an infernal ill-convenience.’”

“Well, I shouldn’t think it had ever ill-convenienced you much—eh, Miss West?”

Miss West—born actress—made a

198 Married or Single ?

gesture of airy negation, and, turning quickly to Mr. Fitzherbert, asked him "if he remembered Mrs. Veryphast last season, and her extraordinary costumes. She quite gloried in her shame, and liked to know that every eye was fixed upon her. She had one awful gown—pale yellow, with enormous spots. She reminded me of a Noah's-ark dog. It was her Sunday frock ; but it was not as bad as her hat, which was like an animated lobster salad—claws and all."

Then Mr. Fitzherbert had his turn, and told several anecdotes that had already seen some service, but which made Miss West laugh with charming unrestraint. Presently it occurred to the two gentlemen guests that the lady had come for an audience, that it was nearly nine o'clock, and, making one or more lame excuses, which, however, were very

readily accepted, they rose reluctantly, and, taking a deferential leave of Miss West, with a "By-bye, old chappie," to their host, effected their exit, leaving—had they but known it—Mr. and Mrs. Wynne *tête-à-tête*, alone.

"Well, Laurence," exclaimed Madeline, with her usual smiling and *insouciant* air, rising slowly, coming to the fire, and spreading her hands to the blaze.

"Well, Madeline," he echoed, following her, laying his arm on the mantelpiece, and looking as severe as if he were going to cross-examine a witness. "What does this mean? Have you gone mad, or have you come to stay?"

"Not I," she replied coolly, now putting an extremely neat little shoe upon the fender. "Papa is away, and won't be back until late, and I took it into my head that I would come over and

dine with you, and give you an agreeable surprise ; but ”—with a laugh—“ seemingly it has been a surprise only ; the word ‘ agreeable ’ we may leave out.”

“ You may,” he said roughly. “ I wonder you have not more sense ! If you had sent me a wire that you were coming—if you had even had yourself ushered in under your lawful name ; but to come masquerading here as Miss West is—is too much, and I tell you plainly, Madeline, that I won’t have it. What must those fellows have thought of you to-night ? Fitzherbert will blazon it all over London. Have you no regard for your reputation—your good name ? ”

“ There, there, Laurence, my dear,” raising her hands with a gesture of graceful deprecation, “ that is lecturing enough—that will do ! ”

“ But it won’t do,” he repeated angrily.

“I really believe that you are beginning to think of me as a miserable, weak-minded idiot, who will stand anything. There’s not another man in England would have stood as much as I have done, and, by George! I’ve had enough of it,” with a wave of his hand in his turn. “This visit of yours is the last straw. If you have no regard for Miss West’s reputation, be good enough to think of *mine*. I do not choose to have gaily-dressed young women coming flaunting to my humble chambers at any hour of the day. I’ve been hitherto considered rather a steady, respectable sort of fellow; I wonder what people will think of me now? Your visit will be all over the Inns to-morrow, and half my circuit will be clamouring to know ‘who my friend was?’”

“Nonsense, Laurence! What an old-

202 Married or Single ?

fashioned frump you are ! Girls do all sorts of things nowadays, and no one minds. It is the fashion to be emancipated. Why, the two De Minxskys go and dine with men, and do a theatre afterwards ! Chaperons are utterly exploded ! And look at girls over in America.”

“ We are not in America, but London, where people ask for explanations.”

“ Well, you can easily explain *me* away ! You must be a very bad lawyer if you are not equal to such a trifling occasion as this ! Oh, my dear Laurence,” beginning to laugh at the mere recollection, “ I wish you could have seen your own face when I walked in—a study in sepia, a nocturne in black. Come, now, you can tell your anxious friends that I’m a client, and they will be so envious ; or that I’m your step-sister, a

sister-in-law, or any little fib you fancy. And as you so seldom have the pleasure of my society, make much of me"—drawing forward a chair, and seating herself—"and tell that old woman of yours to bring me a cup of coffee." There was nothing like taking high ground.

"Yes, presently ; but before that there is something that I wish to say to you," also taking a seat. "We won't have any more of this shilly-shallying, Madeline. You will have to make your choice *now*—to be either Miss West or Mrs. Wynne, permanently and publicly."

A pause, during which a cinder fell out of the grate, and the clock ticked sixty seconds. Then Madeline, who would not have believed, she told herself, that Laurence could be so shockingly bearish, plucked up spirit and said—

"I will be both for the present ! And

204 Married or Single?

soon I will be Mrs. Wynne only. Papa is not well now—worried, and very cross. I began to try and tell him only two nights ago, and his very look paralyzed me. I must have a little more time. As it is, I think, between my visits to the Holt farm and here, I play my two parts extremely well!”

“Then you must permit me to differ with you,” said her husband, in a frosty voice. “The part of wife, as played for many months, has certainly been a farce; but, to put the case in a mild form, it has not been a success. As to your *rôle* of mother, the less said the better.”

“Laurence”—aghast, and drawing in her breath—“how can you speak to me in that way? It is not like you!”

“How do you know what I am like *now*? People change. And since *you*

are so much changed, you need not be astonished if I am changed too ! ”

“ And oh, Laurence, I am so—so angry with you about one thing ! ” she exclaimed irrelevantly. “ I went to the Holts’ on Tuesday and saw Harry ; he looks a perfect little angel ! ”

“ Is that why you are so angry ? ”

“ Nonsense ! Why did you tell Mrs. Holt to refuse my money ? Why may I not pay for him ? ”

“ Because it is not your affair, but mine.”

“ Not my affair ? ” she repeated incredulously.

“ No ; it is my business to maintain my son. And I shall certainly not suffer him to be paid for by Mr. West’s money ! ”

“ It is mine ; he gives it to me for my own use.”

“ No doubt—to expend in dress and

206 Married or Single?

such things. Not for the support of his unknown grandchild. You would be taking his money under false pretences. Your father pays for his daughter's expenses ; I pay for my son's expenses."

"And I may not?"

"No." He shook his head curtly.

"But I am his mother!" she said excitedly.

"I thought you had forgotten that! Now, look here, Maddie, I am not going to be put off with words any longer! You cannot run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. You must come home at once. Tell your father the truth, or let *me* tell him the truth, and make your choice once for all. This double life, where all of it is spent in one sphere, and only the shadow falls on the other, won't do. Think of your child"—with rising heat—"growing up a stranger to you!

Poor chap! he believes that Mrs. Holt is his mother. I—I try and see him; but what good am I? I’m only a man, and not much of a hand with small children. Madeline, this cursed money has poisoned your mind! Admiration has turned your head. You are no more what you once were——”

“Don’t say it, Laurence!” she cried, springing up and laying her head on his mouth. “I have been waiting, waiting, waiting, trying to bring my courage to the sticking-point, and hoping to bring you and my father quietly together. I see I have been wrong. I—I will tell him to-morrow—yes, there is my hand on it; and if he turns me out, as is most probable, I shall be sitting here making your tea to-morrow evening! You believe me, Laurence?” standing over him as he leant his head in his hand, and looked into the fire.

“There have been so many to-morrows, Maddie. I’m like the man in the fable about the boy and the wolves; but”—suddenly pulling himself together, and confronting her—“I will believe that this time it really *is* wolf.” Standing up and looking at her, he added, “I will believe you, and trust you. And now”—ringing the bell as he spoke—“you shall have your coffee, and I am going to take you home in a hansom.”

“Home! It’s too early yet—ten past nine. Take me to the theatre for an hour. Take me to the Haymarket; it will be such fun!”

“Fun!” he echoed impatiently. “Supposing any one was to see you—any of your friends—what would they think? They do not know that I am your husband; they would only take me for some admirer, who, presuming on

your father's absence, had escorted you to the theatre, under the rose—that would be capital fun ! ”

“ What harm would it be ? I like puzzling people. I like to give them something to talk about,” she answered recklessly.

“ And I do not. And I suppose I know a little more of the world than you do. You seem to think it would be a joke to fling down your good name, and allow it to be destroyed from pure wantonness, but I shall not permit it.”

“ Laurence how you do talk ! One would think you were addressing a jury, or were some old fogey laying down the law ! ”

“ I am laying down the law.”

“ You must please remember that I am accustomed to be spoiled. Now, *my* wishes are law in Belgrave Square,

and you are going to carry them out, and take me to see 'The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith.' "

"Take care that you do not become the notorious Miss West."

"Now, Laurence, you know you cannot really say 'no' to me. Oh!"—with a slight start—"here comes the coffee at last!" as the laundress, who insisted upon doing this little errand in person, in order to have what she called "a rare good look," fumbled at the door, pushed it open with her knee, and marched in, carrying a small tray, which she laid very slowly on the table, her eyes all the while being fixed on the beautiful vision standing by the fire.

She had her face turned away; but Mr. Wynne, who was leaning his head on his hand, and his elbow on the mantelpiece, confronted her steadily and said,

in a less cordial tone than usual, "There, Mrs. Potts, that will do! You need not wait. Call a hansom as soon as you go downstairs," and Mrs. Potts very reluctantly shuffled out. She had seen a good deal, but was as much at sea as ever.

The young woman had her hand on Mr. Wynne's arm when she went in, and was saying, "you know you cannot say 'no' to *me*, and are going to take me to the theatre." Was ever such a brazen piece! He had his head turned away, and looked as if he'd rather have her room than her company. The girls run after the men now, and no mistake! It was scandalous! The haystack after the cow! Supposing this young person's folk were to know of her carryings on—and with Mr. Wynne, of all men! It beat everything that Mrs. Potts had come across right away into a cocked hat!

A few minutes later they were coming down the stairs, Miss all wrapped up in a long velvet cloak, which velvet cloak Mrs. Potts having found in the outer office, had done herself the pleasure of examining, and—low be it spoken—trying on. None of your “paletot things,” as she expressed it, but a long mantle of crimson velvet, reaching down to the floor, trimmed with thick, soft fur, and lined with satin, smelling powerfully of some sweet perfume—violets. Mrs. Potts, being squat and of short stature, was lost in it. But the time when she was enveloped in a six-hundred-pound wrap was indisputably one of her happiest moments. There was a pocket inside, and in that pocket a dainty lace-edged handkerchief, which, I am sorry to say, Mrs. Potts felt called upon to confiscate as a souvenir.

It did not appear to be one of Mr. Wynne's happiest moments, as he pulled on his great coat, and followed the daintily tripping, high-heeled steps of his visitor downstairs.

Mrs. Potts, who had naturally hung about the door below, did herself the honour of seeing the couple into the hansom, and heard the order—"Haymarket theatre."

"So she had got her way," said the charwoman, as she stood boldly in the doorway and looked after them. Then she went upstairs to Mr. Wynne's room and finished the sherry, poured herself out a cup of coffee, which she sipped at her leisure, as she sat comfortably over the fire in Mr. Wynne's own chair. One half of the world certainly does not know how the other half lives!

"Really, it is very ridiculous of you

to be so strait-laced and grumpy, Laurence!" said his wife. "Think of all I am going to relinquish for your sake!"—touching her furs. "This mantle, which makes other women green with envy, cost nearly six hundred pounds!"

"Six hundred fiddlesticks!" he echoed incredulously.

"You can see the bill, if you like."

"You ought to be ashamed to wear it, Maddie!"

"Not at all, my dear. It is for the good of trade. If some people did not buy and wear fine feathers, what would become of trade?"

"Six hundred pounds! More than he could earn in twelve months! And she paid that for an opera-cloak!"

"You really must make yourself agreeable, Laurence. This may be the last time I shall play the fairy princess,

before I go back to my rags. No, no, I don't mean that."

"Something tells me, all the same, that this will not be your last appearance in your present character. Not that I question for a moment your good intentions, Maddie, or disbelieve your word. But I have a presentiment—a sort of depressing sensation that I cannot account for—that, far from your returning home to-morrow, our lives will somehow have drifted farther apart than ever."

"Fancy a clever man like you, dear, believing in such foolish things as presentiments! They are merely remnants of the dark ages. I hope we shall be able to get a box," she added, as they drew up at the theatre, "no matter how tiny; a stall would be too conspicuous."

216 Married or Single?

The Wynnes were late. The orchestra was playing during an interval, and they had the great good luck to secure a box overlooking the stage.

Madeline removed her mantle, and, taking a seat with her back to the house, having glanced round with affected nervousness, said to her companion, in a smothered whisper—

“Sister Ann, Sister Ann! do you see anybody looking? Do you think any one recognized me by my back hair?”

Laurence had noted several familiar faces; and one man in an opposite box had recognized him. But this was of no importance, as he could not possibly identify Madeline.

Madeline whispered and laughed and chattered to him behind her fan. He told himself that he was a sour, sulky brute to be so gruff and irresponsible to

the beautiful girl opposite to him, although he could hardly realize that she was his wife as he glanced at her at this special moment, as she sat with her head resting on her hand, diamonds glittering on her gown and in her hair, a gay smile on her lips, no wedding-ring on her finger. Could this really be Madeline West, Mrs. Harper's pupil-teacher, and his wife?

His acquaintance in the opposite box was astonished to see Wynne over against him. Surely it was not to another man that he was thus bending forward and stooping his head so politely, as if to lose nothing of what was being told him! Ah, no—he thought not! as presently a very pretty hand, wrist, and arm emerged from the shadow of the curtain, and lay upon the velvet cushion.

He snatched up his excellent opera-glass, and noted a sparkling bracelet and diamond rings. But no—there was not a wedding-ring amongst them!

CHAPTER XXVI.

MR. WYNNE MAKES A STATEMENT.

WHEN the play was over the Wynnes prudently waited, and were almost the last to leave. But, even so, when they passed through the lobbies, a good many people were still to be seen. They were a rather remarkable couple, and although Madeline had drawn her lace scarf well over her head, it was of no avail. On the stairs she came face to face with Lord Tony.

“Hullo!” he exclaimed, as he accosted her. “I did not know you were coming here to-night. Rachel told me she

220 Married or Single?

lunched with you to-day, and you were alone in your glory. Whom did you come with?" And he looked as if he was expecting to see some of the party.

"I came in very good company," she replied. "But, pray, who made *you* my father confessor?"

"I only wish I was! Are you going on to supper at the Candy-tufts? If so, we shall meet again."

"No, I'm going home this moment."

"How virtuous! Well, you'll be in the Row to-morrow—riding—at the usual hour?"

"I'm not sure."

"I'll look out for you about ten. Good night." And he hurried off.

"Who is that?" inquired Laurence.

"Oh, a great friend of papa's—Lord Anthony Foster."

Mr. Wynne's Statement: 221

"Indeed! I shouldn't have thought they had many tastes in common."

"Well, at any rate they have *one*," she answered, with a flippant laugh.

"Yes, dense as I am, I think I can guess it!"

Mr. Wynne was also recognized by several of his own friends. Why is it that there is always some one to see you when you wish to escape notice, and, when you particularly desire to court observation, there is never any one forthcoming?

No; and yet if you lose a front tooth, and, with a gaping chasm in your neat front row, are *en route* to the dentist, you are bound to encounter half your acquaintances.

Mr. FitzHerbert and Mr. Treherne were standing on the steps as their friend passed, and wished him a cheerful good night.

222 Married or Single?

He did not accompany Madeline ; she would not permit it. She must get home at once, before her father returned, she whispered ; “ and supposing she were seen driving up, escorted by a gentleman, a stranger ! ”

“ All right, all right, Maddie,” wringing her hand. “ But, mind you, it is the last time. Remember, to-morrow ! Send me a wire, and I shall come and fetch you.”

Then, with a gesture of farewell, he stepped back, and she was quickly whirled away.

Mr. FitzHerbert and Mr. Treherne were still endeavouring to light up, and had not yet started to walk ; the night was fine and frosty, and they had not far to go.

“ I’m coming your way. Hold on a minute till I get out my cigar-case,”

Mr. Wynne's Statement: 223

said their late host. And soon the trio were facing homewards, discussing the piece, the actresses, the audience; but not a word dropped from either gentleman's lips with regard to Wynne's mysterious lady friend, though, like the celebrated parrot, they thought the more. Wynne was a reserved sort of chap. For nearly a year he had dropped out of their ken. Jessop alone was his confidential friend. None ever dreamt of poking their noses into his affairs, as a caustic reply, or a painful snub was sure to be the reward of the experiment. He was of good family—that they knew; and latterly some of his influential relations had been looking him up. (Nothing succeeds like success, and the brilliant author of society skits was now eagerly claimed by his connections.)

Nevertheless, they were exceedingly

224 Married or Single?

anxious to know more respecting Miss West, the gay vivacious beauty, whose fame had spread far and wide, whose riches and whose disheartening indifference to the advances of the most eligible *partis* were alike proverbial.

What on earth had she to do with a hard-working barrister like Wynne, who rarely mixed in society? They asked each other this question after they had left Wynne and his client *tête-à-tête*.
“Business?”

It was confoundedly odd that she should pitch on such an hour, and on such an uncommonly handsome fellow as Wynne for her legal adviser; and the funniest part of it all was, that Wynne was not particularly pleased to see her, and treated her as coolly as if she had been his grand-aunt by marriage! Talking of matters far different from their inmost

thoughts brought the trio to Mr. Treherne's chambers.

"Come up, you fellows, and have some devilled bones," he said hospitably ;
"the night is young !"

Mr. FitzHerbert never turned a deaf ear to such an appeal, but Wynne on this occasion, rather to his friend's surprise, said, "All right, I'll come up for a minute," and sprang up the stairs two steps at a time.

"I'm not going to stay," he said, taking off his hat and standing with his back to the fire, still in his top coat ;
"but I've just wished to have a word with you two fellows. I want to ask you, as a special favour to *me*, to say nothing to any one of having met Miss West in my chambers."

The two guests muttered, "Oh, of course not ; certainly not ;" but without any

226 Married or Single?

great alacrity. This demand was decidedly a blow, for they were only human, and were looking forward to describing the scene with pleasurable anticipation.

“When I ask you to do me this favour,” he resumed, as coolly as if he were speaking in court, “I think it only fair to take you into my confidence, and to tell you our secret. Miss West and I were married nearly two years ago. *She is my wife.*”

And putting on his hat, he nodded good night with the utmost *sangfroid*, and ere they could get out one single syllable, much less question, he was already at the bottom of the last flight of stairs.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A PROMISE POSTPONED.

“A TELEGRAM for you, sir,” said one of the clerks to Laurence Wynne, the following morning. Telegrams were a common arrival; but instinctively he felt that there was something unusual about this one, as he tore it open and glanced over it.

“My father is dangerously ill. Impossible to fulfil promise. Writing.”

“I knew it,” he said, as he crumpled the paper in his hand, then smoothed it and read it over again. “No,” to the clerk, who had a bet on an imminent big

228 Married or Single?

race, and had gathered alarm from Mr. Wynne's expression ; " no, Stevens ; there is no answer."

* * * * *

" Mr. West had come in and gone to bed," so Miss West was impressively informed by the butler. Yes, he had inquired for her, and he had told him that, to the best of his belief, she was spending the evening with Lady Rachel.

Madeline breathed again freely, and hurried up to her own room, almost afraid of encountering her fussy and inquisitive parent on the stairs, and being rigidly questioned then and there.

But Mr. West had not been feeling well, and complained of his chest and breathing, and had gone straight to bed, so said Josephine. Consequently there was no chance of his loitering about in passages, awaiting her, and catching cold.

A Promise Postponed. 229

Madeline sat over her fire, for a long time, wondering how she could bring herself to tell him, and what would be the result of her great piece of news. It must be told—and told to-morrow; Laurence was evidently serious. She had not known till now that Laurence could be hard, stern, and immovable. Well—well—she wished the ordeal was over, and well over; this time to-morrow it would be a thing of the past.

“Perhaps, nay, most likely,” she said to herself half-aloud, “this is the very last time I shall sit at this fire; the last time I shall have a maid to lay out my things and brush my hair. Heigho! I wish—no—no—I don’t wish I had not married Laurence, but there is no harm in wishing that he was *rich*!”

Madeline’s terror of her inevitable interview kept her awake for hours; her

230 Married or Single?

heart beat so loudly, that it would not suffer her to sleep, and it was really morning when she fell into a troubled doze, from which she was aroused by Josephine with an unusually long face, and no morning tea in her hand.

“Mademoiselle,” she said, “your father is very ill, so his man says. The doctor has been sent for. They think he has got inflammation of the lungs.”

Madeline sprang out of bed, huddled on some clothes, and went at once to her parent's room. He was very ill—in high fever, his breath coming in quick labouring gasps. It was, as Josephine had said, inflammation of the lungs, and the doctor added, “a very sharp attack.” It had come to a crisis with extraordinary rapidity. It was, he admitted, a grave case; he would like another opinion, and

A Promise Postponed. 231

two hospital nurses must be procured at once. How quickly every alleviation, every possible remedy for sickness, every luxury, flows into a rich man's sick-room!

Was he dangerously ill? asked Madeline, with bated breath.

“Well, there was always a danger in these sudden attacks, and Mr. West had lived a hard life and taken an immensity of wear and tear out of his nerves and vitality. His heart was weak; but still, he had pulled people through worse cases, and she must not think that because her father was seriously ill he was bound to —to—” and he left her to fill in the blank herself, not wishing to hint at that ugly word—death.

And thus was Madeline's confession postponed *sine die*, and Madeline felt that she had been reprieved. Yes, the

232 Married or Single?

personal fascination of Laurence's presence had already faded. She wrote a long affectionate letter, and explained the state of the case to Laurence, and sent him constant bulletins of her father's progress, and except for one flying visit to the Holt Farm and once to church on Sundays, she never left the house for the whole month of November. However, she was cheered in her monotonous duties by the company of Mrs. Leach, who, on hearing of dear Mr. West's illness, had written from Brighton and volunteered her services to her darling Madeline. Then she had arrived in person, and urged her request with persistence. She would look after the house, see callers, write notes, and leave Madeline unlimited time to spend with the dear invalid.

At first Mr. West, fretful and weary, would not hear of her arrangement. It

A Promise Postponed. 233

was one thing to look into the fair widow's eyes and hold her hand and listen to her flatteries, when in good health, on an idle autumn day; it was another to have her coming and quartering herself thus on a sick house. However, after many messages and intrigues and excuses, Madeline gave way. She was weak, the besieger was strong, and she begged her father to accept the proffered favour.

“I cannot get rid of her, dear. She is determined to come, and, after all, *you* won't see her, you know.” But here she reckoned without her guest.

In less than a week Mrs. Leach was frequently smoothing the sick man's pillow. She paid him a little visit daily, to which he actually looked forward. She told him all the latest news, she flattered him, and she made an agreeable object in

234 Married or Single?

the sick-room, with her charming gowns and handsome face.

After all, she took no part in the management of the house, nor did she see visitors, or write notes. She was (she said) so stupid about domestic matters. It seemed to Madeline that their pre-arranged *rôles* were exchanged; she kept to her usual duties as housekeeper and mistress of the establishment, and Mrs. Leach gave more and more of her time to the sick-room. She had a pleasant voice which never tired, and read aloud to the invalid for hours. She made him his afternoon tea with her own fair hands, and always took a cup with him. Indeed Mrs. Leach cruelly maligned herself when she called herself stupid; on the contrary, she was an excessively clever woman, twice as worldly wise as her pretty Madeline. In her heart of hearts, she

A Promise Postponed. 235

had determined to be Madeline's step-mother; but Madeline must marry, she would prefer the house to herself, and she looked round the gorgeous yellow drawing-room with the air of a proprietor, and indeed had already mentally altered the arrangement of the furniture! Why did not Madeline accept one of the gilded youths who fluttered round her? There was some story in Madeline's past, and if she could not steal the key to her skeleton cupboard, she was determined to pick the lock, for she had had a glimpse through the keyhole—and there *was* something inside! This glimpse had been afforded her by means of a young lady who had stayed at the same hotel at Harrogate, a Miss De Ville, who had been for several years at the same school as the lovely Miss West. Crafty Mrs. Leach affected a very faint acquaintance with Miss West

236 Married or Single?

but a very warm interest in Miss De Ville and her school days, and even went so far as to ask her in to tea in her own little sitting-room, and showed her the photographs of her cousins, the Countess of Cabinteely and the Honourable Mrs. Greene-Pease.

“And so you were at school with Madeline West, the Australian heiress?” she said.

“Yes, for several years; the last year and a half she was a pauper—a pupil-teacher who received no pay—and I do believe wore Miss Selina’s old shoes.”

“How extraordinary!”

“Yes; her father never paid for her, though for years before he had paid very highly. She learnt everything, even swimming and riding, and had most lovely clothes. Then he disappeared. However, he has bobbed up again with

A Promise Postponed. 237

quantities of money, by all accounts—*at present.*”

“And when he came home was he not ashamed of himself? What excuse had he when he found his daughter in such a condition?” demanded Mrs. Leach.

“I don’t know; he *did* find her there. But this is the funny thing: she had been sent away in *disgrace*, so it was whispered, one Christmas holidays, and was absent for a good while.”

Mrs. Leach opened her great dark eyes and exclaimed, “Good gracious! Where was she? What had she done?”

“Well, it happened in the holidays, you see, and just afterwards there was a great piece of fuss about Miss Selina’s marriage and quarrel with Mrs. Harper, so that put the thing aside; but we did hear through the servants,” and here

238 Married or Single?

she had the grace to redden, "that Miss West had run away from school."

"And was that all?"

"Well, Mrs. Leach, don't you think it a good deal?"

"Of course, of course!" impatiently, "shocking, abominable! But were there no details and no particulars—no reason given for her escapade?"

"No; and Mrs. Harper and Miss Letitia, when I asked them plump out one day, when I was staying in the neighbourhood and was having supper with them, denied it most emphatically. They were quite *angry*."

"Oh!" exclaimed Mrs. Leach, with a gasp of disappointment. "Hushed it up for the credit of the school, eh?"

"No, they said Miss Selina had made dreadful mischief, and been the cause of Madeline being sent away for a little

A Promise Postponed. 239

time; but we have never heard Miss Selina's version of the story," she added expressively.

"Where is *she* now?"

"Oh, she married a clergyman much younger than herself, and has gone to the South Sea islands."

"Yes, well out of the way. And are you intimate with Miss West?"

"No; we had a quarrel the last year she was at school with me, and did not speak for months."

"What was it about?"

"Oh, something trivial—hairpins, I think, or not passing the butter; but I never really liked her. Still, for old times' sake, I have sometimes thought of calling. My aunt, Lady Mac Weasle, knows her, and says the Wests give magnificent entertainments and go everywhere."

“ Yes ? ”

“ I’ve seen her driving in the Park, beautifully dressed ; but I am sure she is painted. Perhaps some day I shall call, or rather get my aunt to take me.”

“ Well, dear, there is the first dressing-bell, so I must send you away. Good-bye, for the present. I have enjoyed this little chat *so* much, you have such a way of interesting one.” And really, for once, Mrs. Leach was speaking the pure and unadulterated truth.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A PORTIÈRE WHICH INTERVENED.

MR. WEST was ably nursed, he was wiry, and he struggled back to a most trying, peevish convalescence, greatly hastened by Mrs. Leach's assiduous attentions; and early in January he was ordered off to the Riviera without delay. He was to go to Nice, and, of course, he was not to go alone. Madeline would accompany him. What would Laurence say to this?

In her father's present precarious state of health, she dared not tell him her news, it would be too great a shock;

242 Married or Single?

and yet she almost dreaded facing her husband with another excuse.

Laurence was not to be trifled with, still less her father. What an unlucky creature she was! she said to herself tearfully.

Between these two men, who had such claims upon her, what was she to do? Which was to be sacrificed, father or husband? And then there was little Harry.

And yet her father clung to her as tenaciously, as if he were a child, and could scarcely endure her out of his sight.

Circumstances put tremendous pressure upon her, circumstances in the shape of doctors, her father, and her fears; and she allowed herself, as usual, to drift.

It was quite settled that she was to

go to Nice—in fact, there had never been any question of her remaining behind—and to stay there until May. She had no alternative in the character of Miss West, go she must; but in her character of Mrs. Wynne, how was she to act? What about her husband and son?

She dared not again venture a visit to the Temple, so she wrote a very loving pleading little letter, putting everything before Laurence in the best and strongest light, as seen from her own point of view, and imploring him to be patient just a little longer, until her father was well enough to bear the shock—and to live without her. To this letter she received no reply for ten days.

Then Mr. Jessop called; he was an occasional visitor at Belgrave Square. He felt a certain cynical pleasure in

244 Married or Single?

watching both “hands” in this curious game. It was ten times more interesting than the best novel going, or even the latest society play, so he told himself. To see little—no, she was not little, but young—Mrs. Wynne once, and to see her as she was now, was indeed a most startling contrast. To see Laurence working away like a horse in a mill, was another fine sight. And to behold a couple, once so devoted, so absolutely indifferent to one another, so totally divided by that great gulf, wealth, was the strangest spectacle of all!

Mr. Jessop occasionally dropped in on a Sunday afternoon, and paid his respects to Miss West and her father. A short time before their departure for the sunny South, he called to take leave and wish them “bon voyage.” It was one gloomy January afternoon. Mr. West was not

visible, but Miss West received him and various other visitors in a snug, warm little drawing-room, one of a suite where she dispensed small talk, smiles, and afternoon tea. Mr. Jessop sat out all the other visitors with imperturbable resolution, and when the last had risen and departed, he brought his chair nearer to the fire, unasked, crossed his long legs, stuck his glass in his eye, and, after a momentary pause, said—

“And how does Laurence look upon this little expedition of yours?”

“He has not answered my letter; but, you know, silence gives consent,” was the smiling response. “Are you surprised?” and she awaited his verdict with smiling, upraised eyes.

“Well, frankly, I am.”

“You, under similar circumstances, would not be so complacent.”

246 Married or Single?

“No; I should probably be up before the ‘beak’ for wife-beating.”

“Mr. Jessop!”

“Mrs. Wynne!”

“Hu-s-sh!” with a quick gesture of dismay.

“Well, I will ‘hu-s-sh!’ as you wish it; but it will be shouted on the house-tops some day. How you have kept the secret for so long amazes me; even Wynne’s old friends don’t know of your existence. His own distant relations have actually reinstated him. They believe that he made a fool of himself with a penniless shop-girl or teacher, and is now a *not* disconsolate widower!”

This was a very nasty speech; but Mr. Jessop was in a bad humour. When he looked round this luxurious abode, and had seen Mrs. Wynne receiving homage and dispensing favours among a little court,

and then recalled his old schoolfellow's quarters, his ascetic life, his laborious days—his heart became hot within him.

“Why do you say such horrid things?” she asked petulantly.

“When did you see Laurence last?”

“I’ve not seen him for ages—centuries! Not since I dined with him in his chambers. I walked in and found him entertaining two men. Oh, I wish I could draw their faces!”

“I wish you could! I heard of that. You gave the staircase something to talk about. Laurence is on circuit now. I dined with him a couple of weeks ago. He is working very hard—too hard; but he won’t mind any one. I must say you are a pretty pair!”

“Thank you; it is not often that *you* pay me a compliment!” she returned, with a bend of her head.

248 Married or Single?

“And Harry?”

“He is very well.”

“I must run down and see him when I can, as one of the duties of a godfather.”

“Yes; he is growing quite a big boy, and will soon be able to use your knife and fork.”

“I’m glad to hear it; but I should have thought he wanted some teeth first!” Then, as a clock chimed, “Hullo! that is half-past six, and I must go; and you are off next week, and go straight through to Nice *wagon de luxe*, and all that sort of thing?”

“Of course,” with a slightly defiant smile.

“Have you any message for *him*?”

“No, thank you; I’m afraid you would be an indifferent Mercury. No, I have no message. Good-bye.”

They shook hands rather limply, and

he took leave. As the door closed on Mr. Jessop she gave a long sigh of relief, and was about to reseal herself, when her quick ear caught a sound behind a heavy velvet *portière* which divided the room from an inner sanctum; it was the sound of the dropping of a small article, such as a bangle or thimble, on the parquet. Prompted by a sudden and inexplicable impulse, she pulled aside the curtain, and Mrs. Leach, with a blotter in her hand and an expression of embarrassment on her face, stood revealed.

“I—I—was writing in there, dear, some urgent notes, and I have dropped my pet pen. It is one I am so fond of. Do help me to look for it, darling.”

Mrs. Leach was inclined to embonpoint and rather stiff.

“Oh, it is easily found!” said Madeline, picking it up after a moment’s

search. As she handed it to its owner, who had now advanced to the full light, their eyes met. Madeline read in those uneasy, slyly scanning orbs that their owner had her suspicions, that this smiling widow had been listening behind the *portière*. Should she tax her or not?

Mrs. Leach was an adept at reading faces. She saw that Madeline distrusted her smooth lies, that Madeline was secretly terrified, that Madeline was eagerly searching her mind as to what she could possibly have heard; that it was a critical moment. Accordingly she made a bold move.

“I know what you think, dear,” she said, coming up to the fire and warming one foot—“you think I have been unintentionally eavesdropping.”

She had been eagerly listening, with every nerve strained, for ten whole

minutes ; but, alas ! the *portière* was very thick, the sounds were muffled, and she had, unfortunately, caught no names. She was certain that she had been in every sense on the threshold of dear Madeline's secret ; but, alas ! she had not got beyond that ; had only caught a word here and there. The word "Hush !" something about "shop girl," and "a widower ;" something about "a staircase," and a "compliment ;" something about "a knife and fork," and, lastly, two whole sentences, "How you have kept the secret for so long amazes me !" and "Have you any message for him ?"

Whoever this *him* was, he was Miss West's lover, the man whose influence enabled her to turn a deaf ear to every other suitor. Presumably he was not presentable. If Madeline would but marry him, or elope with him, the course

would be open to her, she would easily step into her place. The main thing was to lull Madeline's suspicions, to give her plenty of rope—in other words, opportunities for meetings—to pretend to see nothing, yet to allow nothing to escape her vigilance. This man—his name was Jessop—was in Madeline's secret, the secret she had kept so amazingly! If she played her cards properly, she, too, would soon share it!

“I declare I did not hear a single word. I am a little deaf since I had the influenza; so whatever you were talking about is perfectly safe as far as *I* am concerned.”

Madeline made no reply, but came and stood before the fire, and her pretty, level brows were knit. She was endeavouring to recall her recent conversation, and as well as she could recollect, she

had said *nothing* that incriminated her. She breathed more freely. The *portière* was thick—it was wadded; but, all the same, she did not believe her fair companion. Her mouth said smooth things; but her eyes had told tales. Her suspicions were aroused; but she, too, could play a part.

“Of course; no lady ever lends herself to eavesdropping, I know,” she said quietly. “Mr. Jessop and I were merely quarrelling; we often quarrel. He has a knack of rubbing people up the wrong way.”

“Oh, Mr. Jessop! is *that* his name? He is a most cynical, disagreeable-looking man. When did you first meet him, dear?”

“He called on me.” She did not add where—viz. in Solferino Place. “He is rather amusing when he is in a good humour.”

“What is he?”

“A barrister; a clever, idle barrister.”

“Oh, is he a barrister? Do you know, I rather like them. I wonder if he would take us over one of the inns, and to see the Law Courts and Temple? Wouldn't you like to see it, some day?”

“No. I don't think I should care much about it,” rejoined Madeline with studied indifference.

Could—oh, could Mrs. Leach have guessed anything? At any rate, she was getting *hot*, as they say in magic music; and, to put an end to such hazardous conversation, she went over to the piano and began to play a little thing of Grieg's. Now that she suspected Mrs. Leach—handsome, well-mannered, charming, low-voiced Mrs. Leach—of wishing to play the spy, her terrified memory recalled many little items which she

pieced together: how Mrs. Leach had a careless way of looking over all the letters, of hearing two conversations at the same time, of asking strange and seemingly stupid questions — especially about the last years of her residence at Harperton!

In the early days of Mr. West's convalescence, when his appearance downstairs and his temper had been somewhat fitful, Madeline found herself one afternoon alone in the library with Lord Toby. He was talking of the theatres, and urging her to accompany him and Lady Rachel to the Haymarket.

“This beastly snow has stopped the hunting, and there is nothing to do but skate and go to the play. Why can't you come to-night? Your father is pretty nearly all right; and Mrs. Leach will look after him. It's a capital piece.

256 Married or Single?

Oh, I forgot!" and he paused; he had been walking to and fro, with his hands in his pockets.

"Forgot what?" looking up from her embroidery.

"That you'd seen it before."

"What do you mean?" she asked, gazing at him with dispassionate calm.

"I mean that I saw you there, now I remember; but I didn't see your chaperon! You needn't look so stunned; you were with a good-looking chap, in a stage box. You sat with your back to the audience, too."

"What *are* you talking about?"

"And you appeared to be delighted with the piece; but I thought your friend seemed a little bored. And, don't you remember, I spoke to you in the vestibule? Who was he?"

"Oh yes! Looked rather bored, did

he? Then surely you can *guess* who he was!" now smiling expressively.

"Not"—coming to a standstill—"not your——"

"Hush! Yes."

"Well, I *am* blessed! He is a gentleman, anyway."

"Thank you. I must tell him; he will be *so* pleased."

"I mean that he looks clean-bred; not like——" and he stopped. "Of course I can easily find out who he is; but, honour bright, I won't! I will forbear."

"Then, I'll take pity on your starving curiosity. His name is Wynne."

"What, the writing chap?"

"Yes."

"And you are Mrs. Wynne?"

"I am under that impression."

"He must be a long-suffering sort of fellow, or——"

258 Married or Single?

“Or what?”

“I was going to say something that *might* sound rude.”

“Oh, pray don’t hesitate on my account! I’ve often heard you say rude things; and one speech more or less does not signify.”

“Yes; and it may serve as a slight antidote to the large doses of flattery you are forced to swallow.”

“Come! Or *what?*”

“I was going to say, he does not care a rap about you. It’s a little way married men have, particularly in these days of emancipated womankind — especially wives. Does he care, Mrs. Wynne?”

“You want to know too much,” she answered, without raising her eyes. “Some day I shall make you acquainted with one another, and then you can ask him.”

“All right, then; I will. I suppose Mrs. Leach is going abroad with you?”

“Oh dear, no!” she replied, with unusual emphasis.

“Then she is not living here *altogether*?”

“Oh no! What an absurd idea!”

“She is a handsome woman for her age, although she will never see fifty again.”

“I think she will.”

“You mean that she will live to a hundred?”

“No. I mean that she is not more than thirty.”

“I should be sorry to be hanging since she was fifty!”

“Every woman is the age she looks,” said Miss West, sententiously.

“So be it; neither Mrs. Leach’s age nor looks concern me. You and she

260 Married or Single?

hit it off together pretty well, don't you?"

"Certainly," she answered rather loftily.

"Then that is all right!" in a tone of brisk relief.

"What do you mean?"

"Miss West, excuse me, if I repeat your own recent reply to me, you want to know *too* much."

"If you imply——" she began, but hesitated, for at this instant the door was opened by a footman, and Mr. West entered, leaning on Mrs. Leach's arm, whilst his valet followed with a supply of papers, rugs, and cushions. They formed quite an interesting procession.

END OF VOL. II.

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA



3 0112 041771152